

I Reincarnated As Evil Alice, So the Only Thing I'm Courting Is Death!

Chii Kurusu

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vol. 1

I REINCARNATED AS
EVIL ALICE.
SO THE ONLY THING I'M
COURTING IS DEATH

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Volume 1
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Prologue

“STAY back, you monster!”

The man’s screams echoed in the night as he fled deeper into the church. Gripping a knife in his hand, his silhouette flailed its arms wildly, as if trying to cast away the darkness that surrounded him.

“Don’t come any closer!”

As the man stumbled forward, he spotted a figure standing at the other end of the sprawling hallway.

It was a young girl in a black dress standing in front of a door. She was holding a dark parasol, despite being indoors, and staring up at a portrait of the Virgin Mary cradling the baby Jesus in her arms.

“Hey, you! Get inside! Hurry!”

The man pushed her into the room and slammed the door behind them.

He was jamming his knife through the handle to seal it shut when the door suddenly began to rattle violently. “It’s here!” yelled the man in a panic as he held the door closed.

The handle jiggled fruitlessly until the pursuer appeared to give up, and all at once the room fell to a hush.

“What’s the matter, mister? You’ll wake the sleeping angels, making so much noise in a church like this.”

As the girl peered up at him from under her parasol, the man asked, “Are you a nun here? I’m being tailed by a demon’s underling.”

“A demon’s underling?”

“They’re people who’ve been branded with a demon’s stigma to show that they’re going to hell. I’m just lucky I found a place here that demons despise. I don’t believe in God, but maybe this means I should start praying to someone.”

Seeing him break into a smile, the girl curled her lips into a smirk as well.

“Don’t you know, mister? Anyone who goes to hell is a sinner.”

She lowered her parasol. Behind the brim was a pair of blood-red eyes staring back at the man.

Her lustrous, straight red hair fell down past her hips, while pale skin peeked out from behind the choker around her slim neck and the lacy cuffs of her dress.

She was like a doll without a trace of stitch or seam.

The man gulped at the sight of her otherworldly beauty.

“When a human commits an evil deed, *they* are the ones who chase down those humans to deliver punishment. Tell me, are you really unaware of your own sins?”

With a calm, refined expression on her face, the girl reached into her bag and removed a small pistol. As she pointed the weapon at the man, he was all at once aware that the person before him was anything but a nun.

“You’re one of them!”

Just as he cried out, the door suddenly rattled again.

The motion knocked loose the knife that had been jammed through the handle.

“There’s nowhere left to run. It’s time for your repentance!”

“NOOO!”

The girl curled her finger around the trigger, and in the same instant, the man leaped forward to attack.

Though she was able to dodge the first blow, the girl’s head connected loudly with the wall behind her.

“Ow!”

As she let out a groan of pain, an image of approaching headlights suddenly flashed in her mind. Their blinding glare was a familiar sight, but she knew that nothing from her world could produce such a vivid light.

This was...my previous life...

Rain was pouring down from the night sky.

On my walk home from work, I was staring at my phone in one hand and waiting for the light to change at the crosswalk. While checking on a new update from my favorite otome game, I heard a faint meow nearby.

I looked up from my phone and saw a black lump curled up in the street. It appeared to be a kitten, but it was completely motionless. Worried that it might be injured, I checked for approaching cars before rushing out into the road.

Just as I took the kitten into my arms, my vision met with a sudden bright flash. It was the headlights of a truck that had just turned into the oncoming lane. The driver slammed the brakes as quickly as he could, but it was too late. The hood of the truck collided with me and sent me flying into the street, and that was when...

"I died and was reborn...into *Evil Alice's Lover*..."

Only after sixteen years of living as the main character "Alice" did I realize I had reincarnated into my favorite otome game. I turned to look at the window and instantly recognized the girl staring back at me, reflected against the city nightscape.

"Check me out! I'm totally a cute anime girl now! Do you see these huge eyes and this smooth, porcelain skin?! My waist is so thin, it's like I don't even have organs! Is this real life?!"

"What the hell are you talking about? You're creepy!"

The man visibly recoiled upon hearing me rambling like some kind of fangirl. Realizing that I was acting unbecoming of "Alice," I promptly regained my composure and gave the man a glowing smile.

"Ahaha, pardon the delay. The next twist should come at any moment."

With the knife dislodged from the handle, the door flung open, allowing black shadows to swarm the room from every direction in the blink of an eye.

A pair of blond twins separated to each side of the room. In the back stood a young man with a light-pink shawl wrapped around his shoulders.

Blocking escape from the front was a boy dressed in black from head to toe.

With a cold look in his eyes, the boy plunged his blade toward the trapped man's throat.

"Your time has come, Dodsley. We know you set the Tower of London on fire. The gates are open, and hell is waiting for you."

"I-I'm the eldest son of a duke! Scotland Yard can't lay a finger on nobility. You lot should know that much at least!"

"We're well aware, Lord Dodsley. Your father pulled a few strings to make this all go away. You may be a free man, but the British Empire has no need for those who refuse to atone for their sins."

Alice's lines slipped from my mouth with ease. I'd played this

same scene so many times in my past life, I had it all but memorized. The “Tower of London arson case” was the common route at the beginning of the game.

The choices I made in this route would allow me to access the story routes of each love interest character. In other words, the player had to repeat this scene over and over in order to unlock each route and fully complete the game.

“This is for you.”

From inside my bag, I retrieved an envelope sealed with bright-red wax. Each side of the envelope was enclosed in a black frame. It was a formal announcement of death.

Dodsley grabbed the envelope with a confused expression on his face. His eyes went wide upon seeing the words *In memory of Daniel Dodsley* printed on the letter.

“Why do you have my obituary...? Who the hell are you people?!”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Alice, head of the Liddell family. We are tasked with executing the sinners that threaten Great Britain, although there’s no need for you to remember that fact. After all, you’ll be dead very soon.”

“Damn you, demon child!”

He pulled a hidden knife from his breast pocket and lunged at me, but before the blade could reach as far as the fabric of my black dress, the man was hit with attacks from all sides. He perished there, without so much as a dying scream.

“Farewell, Lord Dodsley. May we meet again in the depths of hell.”

I said my final line and quietly came to a decision.

Okay, I’ve made up my mind!

Alice was someone who used evil methods, not righteous ones, to punish wrongdoers. Her unique characterization as a dark heroine made her so cool in my eyes, and that was why I adored *Evil Alice’s Lover* so much.

Now, this is where the romance starts to happen!

With a smirk on my face, I put away the pistol and opened my parasol. As the puddle of blood at my feet slowly expanded, I turned in the opposite direction and started to walk away. My next move would be to wait for the other four people in the room to follow me, and then I could choose which character’s route I wanted to pursue.

I already knew exactly who I wanted. *He* was my absolute favorite character in my previous life!

However, as I continued farther down the dark hallway, I suddenly realized no one was behind me.

“Huh?”

Finding it strange, I turned around and retraced my steps, only to see the four of them busy cleaning up the room.

This housekeeping had been mentioned in the game. It was never shown directly, but it was only natural that it would cause everyone a lot of trouble to leave dead bodies and puddles of blood behind after a job.

I was proud to see my clever partners in action, but at the same time, how could my potential love interests just leave the main character alone like that? I couldn't help but wonder where their priorities were.

“Hey, guys. Aren't you forgetting something?”

All four of them turned toward me with blank stares on their faces. By the look of it, they'd truly forgotten about me. One of the boys cocked his head in confusion as he tied up the body bag.

“We'll clean things up, so go on and head home.”

“That's not what I meant. Isn't anyone worried about me being alone in that dark hallway? Don't you guys want to chase me down and say ‘I hope you weren't too frightened...’ or ‘Are you okay, our poor Alice?’ or ‘You're very brave, Miss Alice’ or something? If you don't, I can't trigger any character routes!”

When I rattled off some choices that could appear in the story, he sighed as if I'd annoyed him.

“What exactly is a character route? Sorry, but I'm beat. Can we talk about this tomorrow?”

“Huh?! Hey, wai—”

I struggled in vain as he grabbed my arm, pulled me away, and forced me into my carriage. The ride home after that was rough and bumpy, but eventually, I arrived at my mansion—all alone, of course.

Standing in front of the property, I pounded my fist against the iron gates in frustration.

“I'm an otome game heroine! How can they treat me like this...?!”

Just like that, despite my newly acquired memories of my reincarnation as Alice, I failed to score points with any of my

potential love interests that night.

Chapter 1: The Queen of Hearts Starts a War

ON that day, I sat down for afternoon tea with a heavy heart.

Sunlight poured in through the conservatory windows and bathed the dining table in light. My favorite berry tarts and freshly baked pies were spread out before me, while the three-tiered trays were overflowing with scones. By all appearances, it should have made for a lovely teatime.

I was holding my favorite teacup, which was speckled in a pattern of little flowers.

The Assam tea—my drink of choice—was still steaming hot.

And yet, not one of these things was enough to lift my spirits.

Why isn't anything happening?

Nearly a week had passed since I regained my memories of being reborn as the heroine of *Evil Alice's Lover*. While I was truly happy to have a chance to live as a character I idolized, there was still one big problem.

No matter how long I waited, I wasn't being presented with any choices.

The whole point of an otome game is to make certain choices that guide you through the story, form a closer relationship to the character you want to pursue, and try to reach the best ending possible.

Without choices, the heroine becomes completely powerless. Unfortunately for me, that was my current reality.

If you can't make any progress with the other characters, you can't move forward in the game. Without pursuing a specific character, a bad ending is the only outcome. The screen will suddenly turn to black, spell out the words *The End*, and send you back to the main menu.

As an evil heroine, "Alice" has no shortage of dangers and enemies to face.

To play carelessly is to meet with certain death. Choosing the wrong route results in Alice's death, as do accidents, illnesses, abductions... There are countless circumstances that can get Alice

killed.

In my past life, *Evil Alice's Lover* was well-known for the number of dramatic death scenes it had. It even won the Deadliest Game of the Year award after its release, in recognition of all the toil it put its players through. For comparison, the runner-up was an MMO where the players are chased by a maniacal killer in a deadly game of tag. An otome game had to be pretty crazy to beat that.

"What should I do? It feels like my life could end at any moment..."

My shoulders slumped, and the boys sitting to my left and right both stared at me intently.

"What's the matter, Alice? You look like a sullen frog waiting for the rain."

"What's the matter, Alice? You look like a frightened rabbit staring up at the sky."

The two children stuffing their mouths with cake were the Tweedle brothers. They were identical twins, dressed in matching sailor tops and overalls, and both had the same adorable face and high-pitched voice.

The older brother, Dum, had a mole on the left side of his face, underneath his round blue eyes. Dee was the younger twin, with a mole of his own under his right eye.

It didn't matter if you couldn't tell them apart, because Dum was always the one who spoke first.

"Don't mind me. I'm just a bit bothered about what choices I can make..."

"Bothered?"

"Choices?"

The twins looked at each other in confusion. Little did they know, they were one such choice themselves.

In the Tweedle brothers' true ending, the three of us state, "Let's stay together forever" as we pledge our innocent love to each other. It's a cute, wholesome story, and after the ending cutscene, there's even a CG of our future wedding where the twins have grown into handsome adult men. It was a very popular ending.

I enjoyed it too. In the fandom, it was known as the "Blissful Future Route."

I would have liked to choose their route if I could. However, as an "Alice" who had no clear path to go down, I wasn't even sure if I'd survive one more night. So disappointing!

“Why, yes, choices! I meant to say that I need to choose a dinner menu for tonight. What’s actually bothering me is this heap of letters.”

With a forced smile, I set my gold letter opener back down on the table. Stacked on top of a plate was a mountain of paper.

Each letter was an invitation to a ball being hosted by various well-known noblemen. No two events were scheduled for the same evening, as if they’d all been coordinating with one another, unbeknownst to the rest of us. While I would have been pleased to be invited to a single event on its own, it felt a lot more like harassment to be expected to attend balls day after day.

“I know the season is right for socializing, but I wonder why these people are hosting parties almost every single night.”

The twins, still with frosting on their faces, responded to my confusion.

“It must be because of all the delicious food. It’s a real treat.”

“It must be because of all the beautiful girls. It’s a real treat.”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t attend...”

It was a dilemma. The Liddell family held a rank of their own, a barony, which meant that as members of the upper class, it was important to maintain relationships with fellow nobles. Rejecting an invitation from anyone higher in rank, like an earl or a duke, was no easy task.

But still, it was I, the sixteen-year-old Alice, who was the head of our family.

In this game, I couldn’t inherit the family rank as a woman, and because there were no eligible male relatives to receive it either, the title was temporarily suspended. Many nobles were displeased by this, and their opposition only grew stronger if I didn’t attend their events.

“I must go. I promised Father while he was still alive...”

As I leaned back in my chair, the ghostly memories flooded my mind. My beloved parents, many of our servants, and even “Alice” herself were all killed in that tragedy, three years earlier...

“Oh my, good morning. You three are up bright and early.”

I snapped out of my thoughts as a young man entered the conservatory with a yawn.

He strode into the room on long, slender legs, and I couldn’t help but be reminded of a stray cat, the way he walked without a care in the world. His ashy-green hair, tied into a ponytail and

draped to one side, bobbed with each step. The man was wearing a striped sweater, slim-fitting trousers, and a snake earring in one of his ears. It reminded me of fashion styles I was used to seeing in my past life.

What drew my eye in particular was the bright-pink shawl wrapped around his neck. It was such a strikingly different color from the rest of his outfit, it almost made him look like a severed head floating above a body.

He always gave people quite a shock when they first laid eyes on him. But he loved that about his style.

“Good morning, Leeds. Although it’s hardly ‘morning’ anymore.”

The wall clock read four p.m. when I glanced at it. The shadows being cast by the sunlight had been growing longer for some time now.

“Why, it’s already time for afternoon tea.”

“Goodness me. But it’s not that I’m late, you see. It’s simply a matter of time being too hasty, and the clocks just can’t put their feet down and say no. I wish they’d learn that no one likes a pushover.”

Leeds, another one of Alice’s potential love interests within the game, always had unique things to say like that. On the outside, he seemed like an effeminate man with plenty of life wisdom to offer, but on the inside, he was purehearted to a fault. That contrast between his two sides caused many players to fall for him.

There was one particularly famous scene during his route in which Leeds accidentally walks in on Alice changing. His face turns as red as a tomato when he sees her in nothing but her underwear. It was such a hit, the wall scroll they made of that CG sold out within five seconds, or so the legend went. Leeds’s story was called the “Sinful Man Route,” and once again, I was unable to pursue it in my current state.

“And here I thought that time always passed at a constant rate. Are you telling me now that it can slow down or speed up?”

“Well, can it?”

“Well, can it?”

Leeds winked at the three of us with a relaxed look on his face.

“You’ll understand someday, my dears. Just wait until you meet the love of your life but can never make the time to see them.”

“I don’t think that day will ever come for me.”

That line came from the game, not my own feelings. However, there was an extra layer of bitterness for me, stuck in the situation that I found myself in. Romance had to be the last thing on my mind with the many other problems I faced.

Protecting Great Britain from the shadows was no easy task. My duties included chasing the most heinous criminals to the ends of the earth to eliminate them, as well as investigating difficult cases that could be a threat to the order of the kingdom.

Being a secret executioner was the same as being a detective who holds the world together from behind the scenes.

I can't be daydreaming about love with everything else on my plate.

As I sighed, Leeds put his hands on his hips in frustration, and the chain of his belt jingled with the motion.

"Of course you'll meet someone. Everyone on this earth has a soulmate they're destined to meet in life. And no one can hold a candle to your looks, Miss Alice. Your soulmate definitely won't let you slip away."

"My looks? I'm average at best..."

Only after the words slipped out did I remember. I was reincarnated as the ultimate beauty!

"Th-There are definitely people cuter than me in the rest of the world! I'm not even wearing makeup, and my clothes are rather dull too. I'm nothing compared to any other young lady out there."

I was wearing a frilly apron over a black dress and had my hair down, with a black ribbon as an accessory. In my previous life, we would have called it "gothic Lolita" fashion, but to anyone playing the game, it was simply a normal outfit for Alice.

Otome game characters typically have two different kinds of outfits they can wear. There's the "everyday style" that they wear for most of the game, but during special events, you get to see their formal outfits. At that moment, I was wearing my everyday clothes. It was a normal look, perfectly fitting for a normal day.

"Your clothes have got nothing to do with it, Miss Alice. Right now, I'm staring directly at the cutest girl I've ever seen! If you can't see it, then I'll cast a spell to boost your confidence."

Leeds spread his arms and puckered his lips. He was going for something wild to distract from how purehearted he was being. A daily hug from Leeds was a guarantee, and an added kiss on the cheek wasn't uncommon either.

As I watched his face approach mine, my mind suddenly

sprang to life.

If I accept this kiss, will I be entering Leeds's route?

I couldn't remember his route at all.

I don't want to fall in love with someone who'll give me a low chance of survival...

I squeezed my eyes shut in a panic, but at that moment, I heard a deep, gloomy voice.

"How'd you like it if I sliced you up and turned you into fromage blanc?"

Leeds was now frozen in place with a dessert knife being pressed against his neck. A boy held the blade against Leeds's artery with one hand, and with his other, he carried a plate stacked with mint treats. His glare was sharp and filled with anger.

This boy's name was Jack. He was two years older than "Alice," making him eighteen, with soft-looking, fine black hair. He was wearing an exquisitely tailored butler's suit, though with his tie loosened and tailcoat wrapped around his waist, any tailor would surely shed tears if they laid eyes on it.

Though his appearance made him look careless, Jack was anything but lacking.

Known as the "Bad-Boy Butler Route," his story was the most popular route in the game.

Young ladies always love their bad boys. It's an irresistible formula: a scary-looking boy, whom no one wants to approach, showing his tender side only when it comes to the heroine.

"I'm the only one in the world who understands him." The bad boy recognizes this shared bond and opens up his heart to you alone...!

In Jack's case, he wasn't alone in life, but the story of how he developed his grumpy personality was fascinating. The first time I played his route in my previous life, I cried until my eyes felt like they were about to dissolve. Then I prayed for three days straight that Jack would find eternal happiness.

He was, of course, my favorite character in the game, but even in my new life as Alice, Jack was someone I trusted with all my heart. He was also the only servant in the manor, so he took on most of the housework as well.

Where were all my other servants? Well, it was just as Dodsley had said. My family had fallen into ruin.

It was only recently that—

“Do as you please, Jack. But how exactly would you turn me into fromage blanc? Miss Alice, do you know how it’s made?”

“It’s a creamy spread made of cheese, milk, and sugar, is it not?”

“Oh dear, I didn’t hear my name in that list. Bad luck, huh, Jack?”

As Leeds snickered at him, Jack clicked his tongue and pulled the knife away.

“I know that, obviously! I’m tired enough as it is, so don’t test me. Bloody annoying...”



His sharp tongue was only part of his charm, though he was never so harsh toward me or the twins. Jack set the plate down gently on the table.

“Miss Alice, what’s with all these letters?”

I looked at the sea of mail.

“They’re nothing important. Just invitations.”

“Invitations?”

Jack frowned at my response, and the twins slammed their forks down on the table.

“That’s right! They’re all from men who want to cozy up to the famous Alice Liddell!” they cried in unison.

“Dum, Dee, that’s not how we should be putting it.”

I hurriedly tried to warn them, but it was too late.

I could see the tensed vein bulging along Jack’s temple. He was gritting his teeth. “You mean it? These nobodies want to seduce our Miss Alice?”

“I didn’t say that. No one said anything about seducing me!”

Jack’s anger caused his white-gloved hands to erupt into flames. The cloth turned to ash and fell away, revealing images of black roses on the back of each of his hands.

This was Jack’s “stigma.”

To live is to eventually reach the point of death, but if the circumstances of a death are particularly tragic, a passing demon may just take enough of an interest to bring you back to life.

Any person given life by a demon will never be allowed to enter heaven. Thus, they are branded with the stigma as a mark for those who are damned to hell upon their deaths. These individuals are also known as demon children, or “stigmata,” and their existence is even more fabled than that of fairies and nymphs to the people of Great Britain.

It was only natural that most people would never lay eyes on the power the stigma contained.

Jack’s stigma produced flames that burned away the objects of his hatred.

Sparks shot from his hands and landed on the table, sending the letters up in flames. The twins let out amused cries as the invitations turned to a pile of ashes atop the plate they had once sat on.

I suddenly worried that the house itself might be the next

thing to burn down.

“Calm down, Jack.”

I clasped my hands together and turned to him, but it was as if he couldn't hear me.

“Don't worry, Miss Alice. He'll burn out soon.”

Immediately after Leeds spoke, the flames extinguished like candles on a birthday cake.

The object of Jack's rage—the invitations addressed to Alice—had all been turned to ash.

“Now we'll never know which families sent these...”

I sighed, staring at the mountain of ash.

Small scraps of paper drifted through the air, sparkling in the light of the afternoon sun.

“Look, Miss Alice. This one didn't burn.”

I followed Leeds's gaze to a single envelope beneath the ashes. “Was this there the whole time?” I asked as I turned the letter over to observe the sealing wax.

It bore the crest of a shield being guarded by a lion and a unicorn. This was none other than the mark of Queen Victoria, the ruler of our kingdom.

“This isn't an invitation, so it looks like it survived. It's a letter from Her Majesty.”

I sliced through the envelope with my letter opener and removed the contents. The Queen's handwriting on the paper was smooth and elegant.

Good day, my dear little lambs. I heard you've already taken care of a certain prominent arson case. Such hard workers you are. My palace maids could learn a thing or two from you all.

“What does it say, Alice?”

“What does Her Majesty have to say?”

The twins, unable to read, had to wait for my explanation.

“She says that you two have been a great help to her.”

“Yaaay!”

“Yaaay!”

They bounced out of their chairs and high-fived. I continued to read the Queen's letter.

Now, I have a very important subject to discuss with you, Alice, my dear friend. Be sure to read this next part away from prying eyes.

Jack scowled as he read over my shoulder. “Miss Alice only? What kind of order is it?”

"It's not an order. It's simply normal chitchat that girls like to write to each other."

Her Majesty would address private messages to me from time to time.

It was usually a frivolous discussion of things like her recent dress purchases or the handsome foreign men she'd hired as servants. Women always enjoy having someone to share in their excitement about these kinds of things.

I hid the letter behind my back so that Jack couldn't read it. Leeds came up from that direction and wrapped his arms around me.

"If it's for girls only, then you won't mind if I take a peek, right?"

"You're no girl! And we all see you trying to rub up against Miss Alice!"

Jack smacked Leeds on the head with a serving tray. It made an impressive clang, but Leeds just stood and smiled as if his skull were made of stone.

"Her Majesty ordered me to read this alone, and I have no intention of disobeying."

I left my seat and placed my back to the window, turning my gaze to the Queen's secret message.

Alice, it's thanks to you that our kingdom can sleep soundly at night. As a token of my gratitude, I've instructed that the Liddell family be eligible to receive the money set aside to pay off informants.

Her Majesty was a private supporter of the Liddell family's work. She believed that preserving the harmony of Great Britain by any means necessary would keep the population satisfied with their government.

Previous monarchs never openly praised the Liddells either, but they did provide us pay for the crimes we solved. As a family that didn't rule over any land, we were only able to avoid a life of poverty thanks to this tradition.

You have my sincerest thanks, Alice. You're a very strong woman, though I know it is difficult in this kingdom for a noblewoman to live on her own. I believe that someday our sex will be able to live strong, independent lives, but that era has yet to grace us. For that reason, I've selected a number of men I believe would make suitable husbands for you.

"I beg your pardon?"

The response left my lips involuntarily when I read the last line. What was she talking about? Selecting men for me?

I'm sure by now you've received a large number of invitations to various balls. I've seen to it that each man is of satisfactory rank and personality, so all that's left is for you to take your pick. Enjoy!

"So, Her Majesty was responsible for all those invitations..."

Of all the routes in the game, I never encountered a plot involving the Queen trying to set me up with a husband. It appeared that my life was not following the script of *Evil Alice's Lover* anymore, which was why the usual choices weren't appearing like they were supposed to.

I don't want to go along with this, but if I stay on a new course, maybe I won't have to be afraid of all the death flags anymore.

Alice will meet with a swift death if she becomes too desperate in her search for wrongdoers.

Seeing as the love interests in the game are all connected to the Liddell family's work, the further you develop your romance with them, the more dangerous the plot begins to turn.

But then, what will happen if I marry a man who isn't a love interest in the game...?

My future husband would inherit the title of baron, according to the rules of this game. I would no longer be the head of the family and would live the remainder of my life as a baroness. Naturally, I would lose control of the Liddell family's secret operations as well.

There was no doubt that this would drastically reduce the opportunities for me to be killed.

"Yes! I'll marry a side character! And I'll retire from everything evil!" I declared.

Leeds and Jack jumped up in shock as I clutched the letter in my hand.

"Miss Alice, you're getting married...?"

"I don't care what Her Majesty says. I won't approve of any man she wants to set you up with!"

"No way!"

"Absolutely not!"

Even the twins held up their fists in protest. It looked like all four of them became a bit overprotective when they weren't my love interests.

"I-I just meant I would get married if the opportunity arose..."

I was surprised by their reactions, and my eyes fell to a newspaper resting on the table. The front page featured a story about young women who couldn't be woken up—dubbed the “Sleeping Beauty” cases by the media.

“More importantly, does this article interest anyone else?”

I spread the newspaper out as a distraction for them.

“These ‘Sleeping Beauties’ are close to my age. I’m not thinking about marriage, but if I pretend this whole thing has me worried, then I should be able to get information out of various noblemen. That’s what Her Majesty told me.”

The four boys agreed to make our next target the perpetrator of the Sleeping Beauty cases. It was quite a relief. I didn’t want the family I shared my home with to be suspicious of me, even over a reason like my love life.

“Will you join me in protecting the harmony of Great Britain?”

I held out my right hand, and the two brothers on either side of me grabbed my thumb and pinkie.

“Of course, our dear Alice!”

“Of course, our dear Alice!”

“I’ll go the ends of the earth for our charming lady!”

Leeds placed his hand on top of mine, and Jack’s followed after that. The stigma was no longer visible on his skin.

“I pledge my powers to you, Miss Alice...even though it’s exhausting.”

On the count of three, the four of them pushed my hand down together.

“Anything for Alice!” they cheered.

I always loved this scene in my past life.

Alice is not related to these people by blood, but you can still feel the strong bonds of family and friendship between them. This is the ritual they perform at least once in every case.

“Oh dear, why does it smell like smoke in here? What are you cute kiddies up to?!”

Just as we finished our cheer of unity, a large man holding a pudding dish entered the conservatory.

His thick eyebrows gave him a masculine-looking face, and the man’s body was covered in enormous, defined muscles. It made him look like a wrestler. He was wearing a brown tie over a white chef’s uniform, although he was not our cook.

This man was Bernard Liddell—Alice’s uncle. Bernard wore his hair in a very unique style, with the top layer twisted back around both sides of his head, and the rest tied into a thin braid.

We called him “Bear” because of his name, as well as from the bearlike silhouette his hair always cast.

Bear often stopped by the house to cook fancy Italian food for the five of us, since he worried about us children living on our own. He’s not a love interest in the game, but he’s a dear member of my family.

Not that he had any idea about the secret work we carried out. Nor did I have any intention of telling him.

I stuffed the Queen’s letter away in my apron pocket.

“We were trying to make Vienna coffee, Uncle Bear. You place a sugar cube on a spoon, douse it in strong vodka, and set it on fire.”

“But we used too strong a flame, so it all turned to ash. Isn’t that just hilarious?”

“I’ve never heard of that happenin’ before! Coffee’s made from roasted beans, so I bet it burns up nice and fast!”

Bear broke into a big smile after hearing Leeds’s quick explanation.

The man’s never-ending cheer was so essential to the Liddell home.

“Well, either way, I’m just glad you didn’t burn the whole place down. Now, who wants a cup of Uncle Bear’s special pudding?!”

“I do!”

“I do!”

The twins scrambled to claim their dessert.

“Dum, Dee. If you eat too much, you’ll spoil your appetite before dinner.”

It was then that Bear held out a single envelope to me.

“I almost forgot. This came in the mail for you, Alice.”

“Another letter?”

It was deep blue in color, exactly like that of the night sky. I ran my letter opener through the paper.

A small card fell out of the opening with a time and location printed on it.

I read the message off the lacy stationery.

*Dear Miss Alice Liddell of the esteemed Liddell family,
I am writing to invite you to an evening of entertainment at my
London residence. I would love nothing more than to be graced by your
beautiful presence.*

With love,

Earl Dark Arland Knightley

“The first side character is here...!”

I snickered, the card gripped tightly in my hands.

If anyone saw the look on my face at that moment, they’d probably be quite creeped out. But that simply didn’t matter. All I cared about was making the most of the opportunity I’d just been presented.

Would I be able to form a relationship with Lord Knightley, this side character? My very life depended on that question.

“Is that from Her Majesty too?”

“No, this is an invitation to a ball being held two nights from now.”

I quickly changed my expression in response to Jack’s question. There could be no worse fate for an otome gamer than to let your bias see you making a weird face.

“An earl by the name of Lord Knightley will be hosting a ball at his residence. Since the other invitations were burned to a crisp, I’d like to attend this one. Will we be able to prepare in time?”

Leeds put his hands on his hips and grimaced at me. “I thought you hated high society, Miss Alice. What’s with the sudden change of heart?”

“Hmm, how strange.”

“Hmm, how suspicious.”

Even the twins stared back at me with doubt in their wide eyes.

“It’s to gather information for the case! Don’t look at me like that!”

As I shouted at the group, I started to sense something deeper.

If I was going to pursue a side character as my love interest, one source of trouble might end up being these four people standing around me.

Chapter 2: Showdown with the Eccentric Earl

I exited my carriage carefully, minding the red-and-black dress that covered my body. The white walls of the sprawling mansion before me loomed overhead.

Displayed above the front door and sculpted into the garden gates' white bars was the residing family's crest. It was a beautiful array of stars in the shape of a cross against a slim crescent moon.

"So, this is the Knightley residence..."

According to my preliminary research, Lord Knightley was an earl who had a large estate in the kingdom's northern reaches. He spent most of the year at his castle but returned to London around the time the other nobles began hosting social events.

I have no idea what this evening is going to bring me...

I shuddered all the way down to my high heels.

I knew I had to move, but the pressure overcame me and I froze in place. I just couldn't understand why my body refused to obey me at times. It's not as if "lift your foot" and "put it down again" are too much to ask, right?

"Are you all right, my lady?"

Leeds looked at me with concern as he watched me stand there motionless.

He was wearing his favorite shawl, which was now accented with lace to suit the ball. Jack stood behind him, and he had his tailcoat and white tie on properly for once. His eyes lit up as he took in all the sights around him.

The twins were staying at home, though it was anything but a night off for them. Our house was constantly under threat of attack, so the pair were there to defend our territory while the rest of us were out.

All four of them were hard at work, and then there was me, dragging my feet like a complete disgrace.

Running away wasn't an option, no matter how afraid I was.

"I'm fine. Let's get this over with."

I forced a smile onto my face. We approached the front gates,

where an old man was greeting each guest as they arrived.

“Good evening. I am Alice of the Liddell family.”

“We’ve been expecting you, Miss Liddell. Please accept this rose.”

The man plucked a single blue rose from a large jade vase.

“All guests of Lord Knightley are to receive this gift. May you and your company enjoy a magical evening.”

He gestured towards the entrance hall, and I gulped involuntarily.

I was entering the battlefield. I couldn’t present any weaknesses to the world.

“The head of the Liddell family must always honor that position.”

“Yes, Father.”

With those words echoing in my head, I commanded my body to take the first step forward.



“...WHAT a letdown.”

I made my way through the sea of party guests, empty champagne glass in one hand.

The walls of the main hall were lined with large mirrors. Noblemen and women, wearing blue roses on their clothes and in their hair, filled the room.

The waiters’ faces were hidden by large masks adorned with various animal ear shapes sprouting from the tops. It reminded me of the cosplay events in my previous life.

My own ears were filled with snippets of gossip among guests. As for my eyes, they were busy taking in the sights of the performing jugglers and the colorful feather fans in the ladies’ hands.

But no matter where I looked, the evening’s host, Lord Knightley, was nowhere to be seen. According to a few guests with whom I exchanged introductions, he was still busy getting dressed.

The young earl had only recently turned twenty-three years old. He was a man known for his love of fine clothes, and he would often have elaborate costumes made with the intention of showing them off to the world.

“This earl must be a strange man. Maybe I should look for

someone else instead...”

By this point, I’d entirely lost my desire to pursue this first side character. I found my way to a less-populated corner of the room.

Various appetizers covered a nearby table, but my nerves had done a good job of getting rid of my appetite. Leeds was off searching for information on the Sleeping Beauty cases, or so he said. Through the crowd, I happened to catch a glimpse of him chatting and laughing with a well-dressed man who seemed like just his type.

Jack was by my side, but he seemed on edge. He was constantly checking the time on his pocket watch.

“We’ve been here for two hours already. What kind of host doesn’t show his face at his own party?”

“It’s rather strange.”

A formal ball is supposed to be a display of a family’s status. If the venue isn’t perfect, then the family must be lacking in wealth. If the servants aren’t in order, then the family’s popularity is called into question.

It may seem like nothing more than a fun evening, but in reality, everyone is constantly judging everyone else on the basis of their class. Like a slow-acting poison, any mistake can result in a sullied reputation for your family or a more difficult social life.

For that reason, a host is expected to greet their guests with a smile, be sure their drinks are never empty, create an enjoyable atmosphere throughout the hall, and keep them entertained until the evening is over.

At the very least, there was no reason to suspect that Lord Knightley wasn’t present at the ball.

“Now that I think of it, I don’t know what the earl looks like.”

As I let out a quiet sigh, I spotted a performer standing in the center of the hall. He was wearing clown makeup and suddenly began to breathe fire straight from his mouth. Among the cheers of awe from the guests was a brief shriek from a woman.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared her ponytail had been singed by the flames. The performer bowed in apology, but the angry woman stomped out of the room.

I used the distraction to carefully survey the crowd.

“No one here looks like they could be the earl.”

“I’ll go look around. That idiot over there won’t be any help.”

Jack glared at Leeds, who was still glued to the same man

across the room. Then he turned to look at me.

"Yell if anything happens," he cautioned. "Leeds and I will be there instantly."

"All right, Jack."

I set my glass on the table and gently clasped his face with my hands. "Don't overdo it. I want you back in one piece."

"You worry too much. I won't be long."

Jack turned and exited the main hall.

Now alone, I leaned my back against the wall and placed my hand over the heart-shaped bag around my shoulder. My pistol was safe inside, as always. This way, I could watch over the room while keeping my back safe.

You never know when exactly an attack might come.

My heartbeat quickened as if it were warning me not to let my guard down.

"That girl with the blood-red hair... Is she the one who almost drowned in that pond?"

"...!"

The whispered conversation of a nearby group of women suddenly reached my ears.

"That's right. She's the daughter of Baron Liddell; she runs that family now. They say her parents were killed by robbers."

"She's the one who lost her memories from shock, right? I heard she was living in the East End like some vagrant."

"That's why she's such a troublemaker. Just recently, she was upset to see a woman more beautiful than her at the same tea party. She tried to push that woman into the pond, but she slipped and ended up in there herself! I heard it from a friend of a friend."

That's not what happened! The other woman was the one who hated me for my looks!

The incident in question happened a month earlier. I was attending a duchess's tea party, and suddenly the other women began to act like I was being rude to them. They used that to justify pushing me into a pond, where I came close to drowning.

Socializing was never my strong suit in the first place. I particularly detested the ladies my age who used tea parties as an excuse to gossip and badmouth our peers. I made no secret how I felt about them, and as a result, I was always given labels like "arrogant" or "uncivilized."

In my past life, we would've simply called this "bullying."

This was part of the story I knew from *Evil Alice's Lover*, so it came as no surprise to me.

During the game, Alice almost dies as a result of the bullying from the other girls, but one of the love interests is able to save her in time. It's a very romantic scene.

But now that I think about it, no one has saved me from anything like that yet.

When I nearly drowned, it was a giant eel that appeared from the bottom of the pond and sent me flying back up to shore on its belly. At a recent garden party, I nearly burned my tongue on some tea served to me while much too hot, but I was saved by a sudden rainstorm that filled my cup and made the tea undrinkable.

Time after time after time... I never got to experience a single event in my life that would earn me points with my love interests.

Why isn't it happening for me? I'm supposed to be an otome game heroine...

A young woman wearing a pair of seashell earrings sneered at me as I moped.

"It's no wonder she doesn't get along with us. After all, we were all born and raised with better manners."

Her brash way of speaking rang a bell in my mind. I turned my head so that I could look straight at the gossipers.

"That's true. I don't get along with liars."

The young woman's eyes went wide at my sudden comment.

"L-Liars? What's this about, now?"

"It's nothing. I just happened to remember that you were one of the women who made me fall into that pond."

I kept my cool as I spoke. The other women furrowed their brows.

"Miss Madeline, is that true?"

"Of course not! It's another one of Miss Liddell's lies. You can't believe I'd shove someone into a pond, can you?"

"Shoved me? Interesting. I don't believe those were the words I used. You distinguished ladies must really love bullying those who are weaker than you, seeing how you all ganged up on me together."

"That's enough out of you!"

The young woman with the seashell earrings—Madeline—stomped off in frustration. Just like a child's game of follow the leader, her flock of lackies trailed behind, eager to hear the whole

story.

Oh well. She was right about half of it.

Three years earlier, a burglar managed to break into the Liddell estate.

It was late at night on the eve of Alice's thirteenth birthday.

Not a single soul within the mansion was spared. Only Jack and I were lucky enough—or perhaps, unlucky enough—to be resurrected by a passing demon.

I believed that the murderer would return upon learning I had been brought back to life, so I left the mansion before dawn and started a new life among the orphans of the East End.

It was nearly six months before Bear found and rescued me from that life of poverty.

Afterward, I returned to prove I was a descendant of the baron Liddell, and by the time a full year had passed, I had received the Queen's blessing to be recognized as the head of my family. Being able to appear at social events was only a recent development.

Naturally, no one knew that I had been reborn at the hands of a demon. But in the eyes of all my fellow aristocrats, without so much as a blemish on their perfect reputations, my tragic past painted a target on my back when it came to matters of their social world.

I won't back down from the likes of those bullies. I'll be rid of all this shady business and live till the day my hair turns gray!

I raised my head, only to find myself face-to-face with a tall waiter wearing a rabbit's-ear mask. His approach surprised me; I couldn't tell what he wanted at first. The man tilted his head and smiled, his eyes lighting up behind a large pair of black-rimmed glasses.

"Would you care for more champagne, my lady?"

"No thank you."

Alcohol was the last thing I wanted at that moment, but the waiter persisted.

"In that case, how about a caviar cracker? Or would you prefer an ice cream topped with sweet syrup? I can also bring you biscuits fresh from the oven."

He whisked the various dishes off a nearby table and laid them out on a silver serving tray.

This man felt more like a pushy salesman than a waiter. I backed away and continued to shake my head.

"I'm sorry, I'm just not that hungry right—"

"What's this? But you're supposed to be enjoying the ball. This simply won't do!"

With that loud declaration, the waiter suddenly tossed the serving tray off to the side. He removed his glasses and pulled off the mask, then ran his hands through the silver locks of hair that were now revealed.

It all happened so fast. I just stood there with my eyes wide open, feeling like I'd witnessed a transformation scene in a magical-girl anime.

"Wh-Wh-WHAAAT?!"

The ordinary waiter had become a dashing young man right before my eyes.

Atop his tall, slender frame was a face with handsomely sculpted features. His lips were full, his nose high, and his chin strongly defined—all undeniable displays of his noble blood.

Eyes as blue as sapphires were staring straight at me.

Like the night sky...

The man trailed his fingers along my chin, which had gone slack with amazement. He grinned at me.

"A host's duty is to entertain his guests. Tell me, what can I do to entertain you?"

"A 'host'? So you're Lord Knightley?!"

Nearby guests began stirring when they heard this. The old man who had given me the blue rose emerged from the crowd.

"I've been looking for you, Lord Dark."

"Gramps! Wasn't my disguise simply marvelous?"

The old man nodded in agreement with the earl's proud boasts.

"Yes, it was quite impeccable. However, I believe the time is right for you to reveal your identity to the rest of the guests. As your butler, there's only so many times I can tell everyone that you're still getting changed."

"I see. Well then, now that the jig is up, I suppose it's time to say hello!"

He donned a large hat covered in fake flowers and fastened a cape around his collar, then leaped up onto the table.

"My distinguished guests, I welcome you all to the Knightley residence! I am Dark Arland Knightley, the current earl of the Knightley family."

The audience erupted into applause after his dramatic introduction.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. The sound of my racing heart drowned out the noise around me.

I've seen this man before...

Lord Knightley made an appearance in the game I knew from my past life. He held a minor role in *Evil Alice's Lover* and was dubbed "the strange nobleman."

"In addition to these street performers, I've also invited an acrobatic troupe with a rich history to entertain you all. They hail from the eastern hemisphere but have joined us for tonight's event. Young or old, master or servant, I implore you all to enjoy this magical evening!"

After a bow from the earl, the sound of a gong rang out from the second-floor balcony above our heads. Dancers dressed in Chinese robes began to emerge from the side rooms around us.

They all gathered to form a long row. Exotic music filled the room and the dancers performed in time with the rhythm, spinning plates on bamboo sticks and balancing white balls with their bodies.

I glanced over at Leeds and found him staring back at me with a look of shock on his face. We had become completely separated by the row of dancers parading through the room. He wouldn't be able to reach me, even in the event of an attack.

"Leeds...!"

"I'm coming. Wait there, my lady!"

Leeds bolted toward the end of the row.

My eyes were glued to him when I heard the earl descend from his table beside me.

"What a breathtaking performance! Wouldn't you agree, my lady?"

"I-Indeed..."

He appeared displeased with my hesitation.

"Hmm," he murmured, pressing his hand to his chin. "You don't seem very taken with it. As the host of this party, I simply can't let a guest go without enjoying themselves. Gramps, take care of the party from here!"

"Eek!"

The cry slipped out of my mouth as I found myself being whisked off my feet. Even outside of otome games, I'd always wanted to experience being carried in a man's arms. But somehow,

the earl just wasn't doing it for me.

He maneuvered through the crowds of the main hall and carried me deeper into the mansion.

What do I do?!

I shrunk into the earl's arms, unable to let out so much as a scream.

The man took sweeping steps farther and farther down the quiet hallway. He carried me past a dark-skinned servant, who opened a door and guided us inside.

A dazzling white light poured out from the room, flooding my vision entirely.

The next time I opened my eyes, I could see we were in a glowing, white library. The furniture, walls, window frames, and even the clock on the wall were all painted white with deep-blue accents throughout the room. A display of blue roses sat atop the earl's writing desk, and his claw-footed sofa was upholstered with classy blue velvet.

"I'm going to get changed, so just wait there."

Lord Knightley laid me down on the sofa, then began to remove his apron and waistcoat with the help of his servant. I blushed and turned away at the sight of a man undressing before me all of a sudden.

What's happening right now?!

I had essentially been kidnapped, even if we were still technically on the same property, but instead of torturing me or demanding money, I was being forced to watch a man undress. It certainly felt like harassment, even though I doubted his intent was to upset me.

We were alone in the room, with the exception of the servant standing in the corner. It was the perfect opportunity to assess the earl as a potential marriage partner.

However, there was also an alarm blaring inside my mind.

This is bad. He's Alice's archenemy...!

Evil Alice's Lover is an otome game where the player can pursue a relationship with Jack, Leeds, or the Tweedle brothers.

The more progress you make in their heart-racing stories, solving difficult cases along the way, the more often you encounter side characters. The women who bullied Alice were one example. Another was a former police officer who ends up at the Liddell

estate while pursuing a lead.

The side character who appears the most in the game is a man who acts as a detective at the scene of various crimes. He's a peculiar nobleman who begins to suspect Alice as the true culprit behind it all. His name, of course, is Dark Arland Knightley.

Earl Knightley stars in many scenes that prompt the player to make life-and-death choices. The fandom nickname for him is the "walking death flag." With his stunning design and standout voice acting, he's truly the ultimate side character. Plenty of fans have pledged their love for Dark, even though he's not a pursuable character in the game.

His popularity earned him a place in the *Evil Alice's Lover* DLC *Evil Alice's Fiancé*, where he became an actual love interest for the heroine.

DLC stands for downloadable content. It's extra game content that gets released sometime after the main game.

To put it simply, it's usually a collection of heart-warming situations with your love interest that take place after the true ending of their route, now that you've formed a real relationship with them.

But unfortunately, I never got a chance to play *Evil Alice's Fiancé* in my past life. It wasn't released while I was still alive.

The bonus content was only just announced on the day of my accident. In other words, I didn't know the first thing about the Lord Knightley who was now a love interest for Alice.

Wait, did that announcement have any information about his story...?

The news had said that the earl's route wasn't a sequel to *Evil Alice's Lover* like it was for the other four love interests. This time, it would return to the main story and timeline of the original game.

It was stated that Alice was going to have her true story revealed, including secrets that were never exposed in the main game. I felt a chill down my spine as I recalled that part.

And that's the life I have to live now...?!

It never made sense why I couldn't strengthen my bond with any of my four partners, despite being the heroine of an otome game. But if this was Lord Knightley's new route from the DLC, it was only natural that I couldn't romance any other character.

If I enter Lord Knightley's route, I'll be in big trouble!

There was no way I could marry the walking death flag. I

would have no way of keeping myself safe. He was the absolute last man I should choose if I wanted to live!

“What a lovely evening it’s been! As it turns out, an apron and a pair of glasses are all it takes to disguise myself from the world. What splendid fun!”

His loud voice snapped me out of my cloud of fear.

The earl had changed into a gray striped vest underneath a dark-blue jacket. A gigantic bow on his hat shook each time he let out a laugh.



It was, by any standard, a ridiculous outfit. I'd heard he was something of a fashion aficionado, and it very much appeared to be the truth.

If he likes drawing attention to himself so much, he's certainly not suited to be Alice's fiancé!

All I wanted to do was lower my affection with him as soon as I could. My life depended on it. I began to search for a lead.

"Lord Knightley, why have you taken me—"

"Oh, I'm sorry to ask, but can we skip the formalities?"

"Pardon?"

He sat down on the sofa across from me. His expression seemed a bit annoyed.

"I hate when people address me by my last name. I'm Dark Arland Knightley, a perfectly normal man who just so happened to inherit the title of earl. So please call me Dark, my lady."

An earl's family is ranked higher than a baron's family. It's highly unusual to address a higher-ranking nobleman by their first name, but since he personally requested it, I had no choice but to obey.

I started over and posed my question. "Why did you disguise yourself as a waiter, Dark?"

"I wanted to have a bit of fun. Didn't you see the postscript on your invitation? It said there was a prize for whoever could find the host in disguise."

"Neither the letter nor the invitation card said anything like that..."

"No, I most certainly wrote it. All it takes is a little heat to make it appear."

"You mean you used invisible ink?! Well, obviously no one would see that!"

Dark cocked his head when he heard my change in tone.

"I was so sure you'd find it. Don't you have a servant who can use fire?"

"!"

A chill ran down my spine. It almost sounded like he knew about Jack's power.

"...Do you know who we are?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Dark calmly crossed his legs.

"Everyone knows about you. You're the girl who restored her

family name after its destruction, and you now sit as its head. Though I only recently learned of the stigmata in your midst..."

"Where did you hear that my servant can use flames?"

"From the only other person you entrusted with the information."

"Her Majesty...?!"

I had informed Queen Victoria about everything—my resurrection at the hands of a demon, how I gathered other children like me, and the work we put into restoring the Liddell family name.

I asked her so many times not to speak of it to anyone. She was the last person I expected to betray me.

"...They're still my precious family members. I don't care if they're stigmata. If you intend to harm us with actions or gossip, I won't hesitate to *eliminate* you."

I sat up straight and glared daggers at the earl. He had to know how serious I was.

"If you value your life, you'll never speak of this topic again."

"I can't just forget about it. A young lady like you deserves a better life than this. Protecting the harmony of Great Britain from the shadows, was it?"

"Your help is the last thing I need."

"I'm not so sure about that..."

He looked as if he'd thought of something as he stood up, walked past the table, and sat down next to me.

"You may not have seen my message, but you were still the one who saw through my disguise. As the winner of my game, I have a very special present to offer you."

"I'll pass. And you took off your costume before I had any idea who you were!"

"I couldn't help it. You were far too charming."

He put his arm around my shoulders and grinned. It seemed like strange timing for a smile. Such a confusing man he was. From up close, I could see his eyes were the color of a beautiful night sky.

Instead of twinkling stars, his irises were filled with the reflection of "Alice."

My face looked much more afraid than usual.

"Don't be scared. I'm sure you'll love it if you decide to accept it."

"I-I said I don't want it! Who would just accept a present when

they don't even know what it is?!"

I turned my face away from him. Dark, now sounding a bit strange, spoke.

"Alice, you have something on your shoulder."

"What?!"

Just as I turned to look, Dark pressed his lips against mine.

He tricked me!

At that moment, I felt a burst in my chest as if a string of firecrackers had been lit. The impact flung open a door inside my heart, and one by one, the feelings I kept locked away began to flood out.

I want to be with Father again. I can hardly bear the loss of all my loved ones. I need to be strong to protect Jack and the others.

One emotion remained behind, deep in the bottom of my heart.

Lonely. Lonely. I'm so lonely...

Tears spilled from my eyes as I came face-to-face with my truest feelings.

I tugged at Dark's sleeve, and he reluctantly broke the kiss.

"It was supposed to be your present... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"You were reading my mind, weren't you?"

"I'm not sure about that. If I said I was, would you believe me?"

It was difficult to accept, but it was true. My heart had been laid bare...

By Dark's magic kiss.

"I don't want to believe it, so I'll ask the truth of you. What did you do to me, and who exactly are you?"

Instinct was warning me not to push him much further, but I also couldn't help the fact that I'd taken an interest in Dark.

I stared at him, wide-eyed from the unexpected intrusion in my heart, and he smiled warmly back at me.

"I'm honored. I want to get to know you better as w—"

He was interrupted by a loud shattering sound. I followed Dark's gaze to the window, where I saw a dark shadow behind the cracked pane of glass.

"Get away from Miss Alice!"

Jack's body was brimming with fire as he hung from the window frame and kicked in the glass from outside. His feet were

about to connect with Dark, so I quickly turned away.

Jack's flames existed to burn away the object of his hatred, and they were directed at none other than the man in front of me.

However, what followed next were not Dark's screams, but the sound of a quiet sizzle.

"...What was that?"

I opened my eyes and was met with a strange sight.

The servant who had stood posted against the wall was now protecting Dark with his body. Dressed in Middle Eastern clothes, he raised one arm above him and surrounded himself with a barrier of clear water.

White smoke rose up from all over the barrier.

It's not smoke. It's steam!

The force sent Jack tumbling back onto the floor. He looked down at his hands when the flames started to dwindle.

"My stigma's fire is burning out...?"

"My water is like your fire."

The servant spoke slowly and rolled up the long fabric of his tunic. On the left side of his stomach, we could see a crescent moon-shaped stigma on his skin.

His servant is a stigmata too!

"I am sorry, Jack."

He put his hands together to condense the water barrier into a single ball, then sent it flying straight toward Jack.

I watched him become drenched from head to toe. All traces of his fire were gone.

"Haha! Wonderful as always, Hisui!"

Dark applauded the man heartily and looked down at Jack on the floor.

"It's nice to finally meet the fire butler in the flesh. Or perhaps I should call you Alice's guard dog. Hisui's stigma here allows him to produce as much water as he needs. Your flames are impressive, but it looks like they're no match for him."

"It can't be. My flames..."

"Jack!"

Dark grabbed me by the arm when I tried to run over to Jack.

"You put a lot of faith in your guard dog, but if he still loses to Hisui, he's not strong enough to protect you. Your life will be in danger unless you rid yourself of weaklings like him."

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

On hearing this insult to my family, I started seeing red. I whipped my handgun out of my bag and aimed it right at Dark's head.

"Let go of my arm, or I'll shoot."

"...I just don't get it." From the other end of the barrel, Dark looked at me with pity in his eyes. "What is it that's driving you?"

"As head of the family, it's my job to protect them."

"I see. That must be why Her Majesty suggested you."

"...I beg your pardon?"

"I'm talking about our marriage."

He smiled back at me calmly, like everything was going according to plan.

"She must have thought we'd be a good fit, seeing as I'm not opposed to demons. If you do me the honor of choosing me, I'll let all your dear stigmata work here at my home, just like Hisui. I'll even take over the Liddell family's secret line of work. You'll be able to live a happy life outside of the shadows."

"You actually want to marry me..."

I shuddered. It was deeply terrifying how Dark seemed so set on this—almost as if he was prepared to accept each and every one of our gravest secrets with a smile.

"I won't let my life be decided by someone else..." I stepped back, putting some distance between the two of us. "You're the last person I would marry. I don't care if Her Majesty suggested it!"

Dark smirked as I steadied my aim at him once more.

"Can a baron's family really deny the request of an earl's family?"

"How dare you bring titles into this!"

"That's right, Mr. Earl. We don't let anyone boss us around."

I followed the sound of the voice and saw Leeds standing in the doorway.

His forehead was glistening with sweat. I could only imagine he'd been searching the entire mansion for me.

"No one wants to marry a guy who doesn't consider their feelings. As you can see, Miss Alice is a beautiful, distinguished young woman. Any man who wants to marry her will need approval from Jack and me."

"So, I need your permission. And what are your conditions?"

"...Good question."

Leeds looked Dark up and down. He was a man of status,

means, good looks, and social connections... In fact, even by the strictest of criteria, there was probably no reason to deny him.

If something went wrong here, I could end up engaged to him in the blink of an eye. Now nervous, I turned toward Leeds, who was deep in thought, and watched as he came up with a condition far different from anything I could have imagined.

"I've got it. Lord Knightley, I assume you're familiar with the case of the 'Sleeping Beauties' and how no one can figure out who's behind them. So why don't we make this interesting? If you solve the case first, you can have Miss Alice as your bride. But if we beat you to it..."

Leeds wrapped his arms around me from behind and rested his chin on my head.

"Then she stays with us. We'll be the ones by her side for the rest of time, even after our souls are sent to hell."

"I accept your challenge. You'll agree to his conditions, won't you?"

"I..."

Dark was something of a self-made detective in *Evil Alice's Lover*. However, I could think of one advantage we had that he lacked.

We were all living in the plot of an otome game. The Liddells were the protagonists; therefore, it was entirely possible we would prove the victors.

"All right, I accept the challenge. We won't be defeated by you."

Thus, our race to solve the case of the Sleeping Beauties was set into motion.



"TWINKLE, *twinkle, little star...*"

The girl slid out of bed in a pleasant mood, humming a song to herself as she moved. Her body still felt warm from the excitement of that evening's ball, and she just couldn't fall asleep, even after changing into her nightgown and turning out the lights.

She then remembered she was still wearing her earrings. As she unclipped them and placed them on her bedside table, the girl caught a glimpse of the window. The night sky was filled with stars

scattered around a brilliant full moon. Upon approaching the glass, she spotted a single silver star trailing across the sky.

The girl had once heard that shooting stars traveled the sky to make wishes come true.

“Please grant my wish. I wish for the chance to once again cross paths with the beautiful man I laid eyes on tonight...Lord Knightley.”

She folded her hands together in prayer, and at that moment, a rustling sound came from the other side of her window.

A well-dressed man was standing there, clad in a black top hat and a cloak around his shoulders.

A blue rose rested in his pocket, just like the one the girl had received at the ball.

“The stars have granted my wish!”

The girl flung open the window in delight, but immediately, she realized something was amiss.

Her room was on the second floor. The man before her was floating in the air.

“How are you doing that?” she wondered aloud.

The man’s cape fluttered in the breeze. The moon cast its light upon him, revealing blood-colored skin covering his entire body, including his grotesque, monstrous face.

“Good evening, my lady.”

“AHHHHH!”

She tried to slam the window shut, but all she could do was scratch at the frame with her fingernails. The man forced his way into the room and clasped a large, bony hand over her mouth.

“Mmmmp!”

The girl stumbled back and fell onto the bed. Her body continued to writhe, but her eyes slowly went empty under the man’s hand, and she drifted out of consciousness. The man’s wretched face twisted into a grin as she lay still before him.

“Sleep well, my sinner. This is all for Alice...”

Chapter 3: Death Flags Never Sleep

THE skirt of my black dress fluttered against my legs as I proceeded past the wooden hallway walls. Jack slouched along behind me. Since we were out on a job, he was wearing his butler's uniform properly for once.

We were being led by an older woman in a high-collared dress. Her feet dragged on the floor with each step, and her shoulders were slumped in a visible display of grief.

"Madame Silent, you said that when your daughter returned from Lord Knightley's ball, she went straight to her bedroom. Is that correct?" I asked.

She stopped in front of a closed door. "Yes. She said she felt feverish, so I gave her medicine and told her to rest. I heard a scream just after that, and when I rushed up here...this is how I found her."

Behind the door was a large bed beneath a lacy canopy hung from the ceiling.

A girl lay there deep in sleep, her body tucked snugly under a white blanket.

She was the next victim in the spree of Sleeping Beauty cases. This was none other than Madeline, the only daughter of the Silent family, who were the owners of a famous textile company. She was also the girl with the seashell earrings who spread those rumors about me at the ball.

In all honesty, I knew from the start that she would be the next victim. It's the first event that happens in the game after you decide which love interest to pursue.

But I'm not exactly over the moon to see it in real life...

It's a common trope in otome games that feature a rich girl as an antagonist. The girl bullies and demeans the heroine until those actions come back to haunt her, and it all leads to her own ruin.

This development is known as the "justice served" twist, as it makes the player want to cry "Serves you right!" It's so popular that some people even pick up the game just to play this part...though I

never cared for it myself.

Taking joy in an event like this can only mean two things: either you've been so worn down over time that you can't feel anything anymore, or you're as coldhearted as a demon.

Despite having been pushed into a pond by Madeline, I didn't hate her. I was filled with a mix of emotions as I approached her bed.

"She's fast asleep."

A small vase rested on her bedside table, holding the single blue rose we all received as guests of the ball. Next to it were a pair of seashell earrings and a small brown medicine bottle.

"Did you hear anything unusual from inside this room?"

"One of our servants heard the window opening right before Madeline screamed. But by the time she made it here, the window was closed, and my daughter was asleep in this empty room."

The window could only be opened by pulling up on the pane, which wasn't possible from the outside. While I examined the window, I took the opportunity to glance outside.

"We're on the second floor, but there's a safety fence underneath the window. I suppose one could climb it if they had a rope... Oh, what's this?"

I spotted a fresh scratch on the window frame, which revealed white wood underneath the scraped-off paint.

When I moved to examine Madeline's fingers, I found small woodchips under her nails.

"It appears that Miss Madeline scratched at the window. Perhaps she was in front of the windowsill when she screamed, and not in bed."

"But what does that mean?"

I began to construct my theory for her mother. It was all based on the evidence I'd seen so far.

"Miss Madeline returned home from the ball, changed into her nightgown, took some medicine, and tried to fall asleep. She then realized she was still wearing her earrings, so she laid them on the bedside table. It could have been then that she spotted an intruder outside the window..."

The more I spoke, the more the details of the case began to come back to me.

The Sleeping Beauty cases always seem to occur behind closed doors. However, during the game, we learn that Madeline had

actually allowed her secret lover to enter her room through the window.

The man in question turns out to be nothing more than a thief. His territory is in the East End, and he's constantly looking for new targets to rob. In order to search Madeline's home for valuables, he forcibly drugs her, causing her to let out a scream in the process.

The wood under her fingernails is proof that Madeline resisted his attack.

Though the man succeeds in drugging her, Madeline's screams alert a nearby servant in time to prevent him from making off with any valuables. In the end, he has to flee from the second-story window.

The window would close naturally when it wasn't being held open, which gave the appearance that this was a closed-room case.

That man used the same method to rob many other girls, but their parents refused to allow police to search their property, so the existence of a burglar was never confirmed. I remember that much.

This was the only case that didn't involve theft.

As I calmly analyzed the situation, Madame Silent came up to me with tears streaming down her face.

"Please! Tell me how to wake my daughter! The police just think she's asleep, and they won't investigate further than that!"

"Calm down, Madam. Everything will be all right once we find the culprit."

"But...what if you can't find them?" Her dry lips trembled as she spoke.

"Well..."

If everything went exactly as it did in the game, the Liddell family would catch the man and enact his punishment. Of course, that explanation would hardly serve as a reassurance for the distressed mother.

"Madam, for now, let's focus on how to wake your daughter. Have you consulted a doctor yet?"

At this point, the game offers a choice to call for a doctor. If you agree to have her examined, you learn that Madeline's coma is the result of excess cold medication in her system, and the doctor is able to successfully revive her.

I thought this would be the end of it, but the woman weakly nodded her head.

"I've already had her examined. The doctor said the medicine

isn't what's done it."

"That medicine didn't put her to sleep? But I was quite sure..."

Strangely, this case appeared to be slightly different from the version I was familiar with.

Even though the rest of the story is right out of the Evil Alice's Lover that I know...

It felt like I was watching an altered retelling of the plot from the other side of the screen this time.

As I pondered the situation, I noticed Jack picking something up in a handkerchief at Madeline's bedside table. I realized it could be an important hint in solving this new version of the case.

"Madame Silent, please rest assured that we will find the culprit. In the meantime, I ask that you continue to pray for your daughter's safety."

I clasped her cold hands in mine, hoping it was a comfort.

A single tear rolled down her cheek, and in that moment, I felt just how capable the characters in this game were of love.



"**THE** medicine didn't put her to sleep..."

I stared up at the clouds as I walked.

The two of us, after leaving the Silent estate, were in a residential neighborhood near Mayfair. The streets were lined with the mansions of aristocrats.

Hyde Park, sprawling and lush, was located to the west. To the north was the bustling Oxford Street, close to the rows of high-brand shops stretching up and down Regent Street. The passersby were all dressed in finer clothes than you would see in the rest of London.

Everyone was rushing about to avoid the chilly June rain that could fall at any moment.

"We best get home before we end up soaked. Bloody rain. I'll find us a carriage."

Jack removed his coat, tied it around his waist, and loosened his tie with a yank. He was back to his usual bad-boy style. I called out for him to wait as he tried to leave.

"Before we go, tell me what you found in Miss Madeline's room."

“...We shouldn’t discuss it out here.”

Jack led me into a nearby coffeehouse. He purchased a newspaper at the counter and led me through the cloud of tobacco smoke out to a seat on the terrace. There were no other customers outside with us, since the sky was dark with rain clouds.

“This is what I found.”

Jack removed the handkerchief from his breast pocket. He unwrapped it to reveal a small medicine bottle and a single blue rose.

“This medicine is called laudanum. It’s also known as opium tincture.”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s a cure-all used for everything from colds to pain relief, correct?”

The medicine used to be widespread to the point that it was sold in general stores. It was still available to purchase by weight when needed, so it could easily be obtained by nobles or commoners without a doctor’s prescription.

Jack nodded. He spread the newspaper out on the table in front of us.

“It’s on the front page today. Read this.”

“Let’s see. ‘Doctors Warn of Opium Tincture’s Addictive Properties’...?”

The article explained the situation:

A string of incidents had recently come to light. Working mothers were giving their children opium tincture to put them to sleep during the day. The kids were ending up dead after overdosing on the medicine.

“This is so tragic...”

“This is happening because it’s so easy to get ahold of,” Jack continued on angrily as I stared at the paper in disbelief. “Opium tincture is opium dissolved in alcohol and diluted with water, and then they put in cinnamon or cloves to give it an aroma. A small dose will make you sleepy or kill pain, but too much at once will kill you, and it’s easy to become addicted if you use it every day. Don’t you think the medicine put Miss Madeline in a coma because she had an addiction?”

“I disagree.”

I picked up the bottle he’d brought with us. The small 10 cc container was still over half full.

“If she was addicted, she would most likely purchase her

medicine in a much larger bottle, even though we only found this small one. She probably didn't think seeing a doctor was worth it, as she only needed a tiny dose at night to quell her symptoms. The medicine's not what's keeping her asleep. The doctor didn't think so either."

In the version of events I knew, the key pieces of evidence in unveiling the culprit were Madeline's testimony after waking and the same bottle that Jack got his hands on.

But if the details in this case were different, I couldn't see it coming to the same conclusion.

Was there even an intruder in the first place? That was the question.

This is still an otome game. There has to be a hint out there somewhere that will lead me to the answer.

The blue rose on top of Jack's handkerchief caught my eye.

"Madame Silent didn't find it strange that you took the flower from the bedside table?"

"This is a different one."

"A different one?"

"Yeah. It was on the ground."

Jack held the thornless rose by its stem and gave it a twirl.

"Everyone who attended the ball was given a single rose. If there were two in Miss Madeline's room, that proves that someone else entered to put her to sleep. It wouldn't be the sort who lives in the East End either. The culprit must be someone of high enough status to be known by Lord Knightley."

That person didn't fail to steal from Madeline's room because they were interrupted. They didn't *need* to steal because they were already wealthy.

"The culprit was there at the ball...!"

I leaped out of my chair, then sat down again when I realized the next problem.

"Sneaking into the rooms of young ladies and putting them to sleep... Just what was their objective?"

"He wanted to watch them sleep...?"

"Jack, do you find yourself wanting to watch women sleep?"

I was surprised enough at his comment to question him on it. Jack blushed.

"No! I don't actually *want* to watch *you* sleep, but sometimes when I go to wake you up, I just kind of end up watching you for a

second or two!”

“What’s the fun in that? This isn’t a face worth looking at.”

I cocked my head in confusion, but it wasn’t hard to see what he meant; in this world, I looked like ‘Alice.’

Even the me of my past life would stare at such a beautiful girl if she was asleep in front of me. It would surely be a sight for sore eyes.

Jack’s shoulders lurched as I sat there in deep thought.

“Don’t talk about your looks like that! You’re beautiful, my lady! Even without makeup, your lips are so red, and your eyes are big and round, and your nose and lips are so small...”

I felt myself smile at hearing Jack’s flood of praise for Alice.

Yes, this was why he was my ultimate bias in my past life. He loves the heroine with all his heart.

“Hehe. It sounds like you’re quite taken with my face, yes, Jack?” I chuckled.

He pulled his hand away from me and covered his face with his arm.

“It’s not...just your looks...”

“Is it my arms and legs as well? I know what you mean. They’re long and slender, like a fashion model’s. Women are more than just their outer beauty, but still, I think it’s the kind of beauty we all would like to experience, if only once in our lives.”

“Experience? No, that’s not what I mean.”

“Then could it be my hair? I know what you mean. It’s so smooth and glossy. The balm I use gives it a lovely fragrance too... Though I wouldn’t have thought you were so attracted to women’s hair, Jack!”

I was gleeful to obtain this bit of information, something I never heard of in my past life. Jack gave a sigh of resignation, wondering aloud how we’d reached this point. But his face suddenly went serious and he placed one hand atop the table.

“Since you don’t seem to get it, I’ll just tell you. What I like about you is how—”

Some horses whinnied in the distance and cut off his sentence.

“What is that?”

I peered down the street, where I saw two horses attached to a carriage. They were coming toward us from the south.

The horses were out of control, and the driver, gripping the reins, looked like he was about to be thrown off his seat. The

passenger car swayed back and forth behind them, crashing into the signposts and stalls that lined the streets.

I watched as the carriage smashed through an ice cream stand. The blood drained from my face when I realized it was a familiar sight.

This is what happens when you make the wrong choice on this street!

I didn't see an opportunity to make any choices, but it appeared my life had veered off course just like it would in the game.

I'll die for sure at this rate!

I stood up to rush inside the coffeehouse, but just then, I noticed a small child walking on the side of the street. If the carriage continued in our direction, she would surely be struck.

"Jack! Take that child and run to the center of the street!"

"But the carriage will hit us!"

"It's not going toward the middle! It's coming toward me!"

The carriage drew closer as we argued.

"Forget it. I'll do it myself!"

I drew my pistol and ran into the middle of the road. The carriage diverted from the path toward the coffeehouse and came barreling straight at me.

I stood my ground in the middle of the street, raised the gun, and aimed it straight at the horse's eyes.



My heart pounded in my ears. I tried to steady myself as I pulled the trigger.

“Forgive me!”

The bullet burst forth and struck the metal that held the horses together on their rope.

With the fixture broken, the horses were now free. They separated to my left and right.

I’m saved!

I lifted my head up in relief, but at that moment, I saw the passenger car racing straight for me.

Ah, I guess I still can’t escape the death flags.

“Miss Alice!”

A dark figure grabbed me and dove off to the side.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tumbled across the street like a stuntman in a movie. Pebbles stung my face as they struck me, but I didn’t have time to even think of screaming.

When we finished rolling, I heard the voice of the person who’d saved me.

“Are you all right, my lady?”

I opened my eyes to see Jack sprawled out at my side.

His amethyst eyes were clouded with worry. Bits of dirt were stuck to his cheeks.

“Yes. You saved me.”

“...I’m glad you’re okay.”

Relief and hope filled me as he wrapped his arms around me so strongly.

This wasn’t a scene I’d ever laid eyes on in *Evil Alice’s Lover*.

When the carriage breaks loose during the game, Alice is unable to escape and always meets with certain death. But in that moment, I was able to prevent myself from befalling my worst fate.

I can change my life with my own two hands.

To think that every single one of my actions had consequences—it was almost as if I wasn’t in the game at all.

Where there were no choices for me to make, for better or worse, I would be met with unpredictable results.

“Who would have thought that real life could be more amusing than a game?”

I began to laugh now that the danger had passed. Jack watched me curiously and let me out of his arms.

"You're a strong woman to be laughing in this condition."

"Not at all. Is the child unharmed?"

I looked back toward the coffeehouse and saw the child in her mother's arms. She didn't appear to be injured. The coachman was off to the side, rubbing his back and wincing after being flung off the carriage, but there were no deaths resulting from the incident.

That means I was able to make a choice where no one was sacrificed.

We slipped through the crowd of onlookers and returned to the coffeshop. The owner, who'd witnessed the whole ordeal, offered us both warm mochas.

I was taking a rest in one of the window seats when I felt something heavy on my shoulder.

"I thought I heard an awful fuss around here. What happened, my lady? Your coat's a right mess."

It was Leeds, who was now resting his chin on my shoulder. He wore a loose and dark chesterfield coat. His bright shawl was the only splash of color on him.

I lifted my cup and breathed in the scent of the mocha.

"It was nothing. I tripped in the street while examining two potential racehorses."

"I'm sure they'll be fine racehorses if you're the one who's chosen them. Though I always bet on the ones who kick up the most sand, not the fastest ones."

He glanced at Jack, who was surrounded by other customers, all praising his heroism.

"Can I ask what happened?"

"There was a random accident outside. Jack saved me, and no lives were taken, so I'm fine now."

"Your life and body may be fine, but is that really all...?" Leeds began to tenderly smooth my messy hair with his hands. "Listen well, my lady. Boys, girls, people like me who don't quite suit either label, and even animals all need a good cry after they've had a fright."

"A good cry?"

Despite his suggestion, I wasn't the slightest bit upset. In fact, I was rather pleased with my successful escape from that death flag. There was no chance of me shedding any tears.

"I see... I'll work in a cry if the opportunity arises."

"Be sure you call for me when you're ready to cry. It's a

promise, okay? There you go—it's nice and pretty now."

Leeds had finished braiding my hair. The conversation ended, and Jack returned.

"Everyone's so bloody excited about the whole thing. Most of this lot saw the accident, too. If I use my flames in here, things might get ugly."

Ordinary people must never witness the power of stigmas. The execution of sinners is the only time anyone's allowed to know what we're capable of.

Jack eyed Leeds, who was still standing behind me.

"Why aren't you with the earl?"

Leeds had been tasked with staying at the Knightley residence. He was to report to us if he noticed anything strange. But now that he was here...

"Dark... I mean, Lord Knightley must have left the grounds, right?"

"Indeed. It sounds like he was arrested by the police."

Leeds said it quite cheerfully, but Jack and I leaped from our seats.

"Arrested?!"



I passed through the gates of the police station alone.

The stone building was chilled to its core. I half expected to see my breath in the air.

A well-built officer and a scary-looking man with tattoos all the way up to his face were going at it in the hallway. It was unsettling to see them spraying spittle at each other as their fight escalated loudly.

I can't believe Dark may have been behind the Sleeping Beauties...

According to Leeds, Dark had visited a judge's house in Hampstead, then strolled himself into this police station, as if it were nothing more than a visit to a coffeehouse.

By the sound of things, he'd turned himself in, as hard as that was to believe.

Maybe he sought the safer option? He knew we would execute him if we learned of his crimes.

It was all too common for noblemen to strike deals with law

enforcers to get off with a lighter punishment. The Liddell family wouldn't be able to get their hands on Dark if he was in prison, and that must have been his plan.

During the ball, he acted so confident that he could solve the cases before we did. But it was just an act to divert our suspicions...

My heart felt heavy when I realized he never intended to marry me.

He acted like he was in love with me, proposed marriage, and even opened up my heart with his kiss. But they were all lies to have me eating out of the palm of his hand.

I hated myself for how taken I was by his charms.

I want to hear Dark explain himself. If I learn how he put his victims to sleep, I might be able to wake them up again...

In a kingdom with no system of family registry, commoners like Leeds or Jack would be unable to prove their status if they were stopped by an officer. But as a noblewoman, I was able to walk around on my own, though I still didn't want to draw attention to myself.

I peeked into the traffic enforcement department—no sign of Dark.

He wasn't in the detectives' offices, nor the larceny department either.

I returned to the reception desk, where a young woman about my age was filing her nails with a bored look on her face. If an earl's confession to such a crime were made public, the building would be drowning in a sea of reporters. Judging by the quiet state of the place, that information hadn't been leaked yet.

"I need to find him soon. Have I been everywhere except the jail cells?"

I would need a visitor's pass to enter the jail.

As I stood there and planned my next move, I spotted another room I hadn't entered yet.

"'Interrogation room'..."

I pressed my ear to the door, which had an "Occupied" sign hanging from the knob. I could hear a man's voice inside.

I wasn't sure, but I thought it sounded like Dark. If he was being grilled about the Sleeping Beauty cases, I couldn't have him carelessly slipping my family's name into his confession.

There's no time to hesitate!

I flung the door open immediately.

The room held a worn-out desk and chair, a single police officer, and Dark, just as I suspected.

But he wasn't the one sitting in the suspect's chair underneath the barred window. Dark was the one doing the interrogation.

"I wish I didn't have to do this, but as an earl, it's my duty to protect the common folk..."

Dark sat on the desk with his back to me. He was wearing a frock coat with lace trim, a top hat with three kinds of ribbon tied around it, and a cane in one hand.

"Officer, I'm sure you must understand what I'm saying. Isn't that right?"

My eyes went wide when I heard Dark's question.

Could this officer be behind the Sleeping Beauties?

Dark may have come to the police station not to confess, but to arrest the real culprit, who was a member of the police force. Even though that meant he'd beaten me in our competition, more than anything, I was impressed with his detective skills.

If he's this crafty, I could easily entrust him with the Liddell family business...

That thought shook me back to reality.

If he took over my business, then I would definitely be well on my way down Dark's character route. I was supposed to be looking for a side character who would give me the best chance of survival. How could I even think of marrying the walking death flag?!

Dark hopped off the desk, pointed his cane at the officer, and barked an order at him.

"Hurry up and solve the Sleeping Beauty cases already! That's your job, isn't it?!"

"...What?"

Dumbfounded, I looked over to see the officer with his shoulders slumped, asking for Dark's forgiveness.

"But you see, Your Lordship, it's only our job to investigate criminal matters. We can't assign officers to this case just because some girls are sound asleep!"

"You fool!"

Dark slammed his hands down on the desk and began to rant like a politician at the podium.

"These beautiful young ladies are trapped in a never-ending slumber, and you have the gall to tell me there's nothing worth investigating?! What is a police officer if not a man who fights with

love, courage, and sincerity to dispel the fears of the kingdom?!"

"...Now I get it..."

I hung my head in great disappointment. Dark was only trying to get the police to conduct an inquest.

Even though the Liddells were already working on the case, since it would be difficult to investigate and convict through legal means...

"Lord Knightley, may I ask what you're doing...?"

It came out as almost a sigh. Dark turned around and looked at me with wide eyes.

"Alice, it's a surprise to see you here. Do you have business in this interrogation room?"

"I'm here to pick you up."

"You are...? No, I can't take it!" He clutched his head as if I'd just told him the world was on the verge of ending. "An English gentleman should be the one escorting the lady, and yet she comes to escort me? What shame I've brought upon myself! Should I fall on my sword like one of those samurai of the East?!"

"There will be no sword-falling. Please quiet down."

The police officer stared at us with a grimace as I tried to calm Dark. I knew exactly how he felt. Trying to converse with such a nonsensical person was maddening.

"I'm going to leave with this man now. Sorry to have disturbed your work."

I dragged Dark out of the room by his arm. People stared at us curiously. We were clearly out of place there.

I didn't want to stand out like this.

It was all Dark's fault, of course. Flames of rage prickled inside my chest.

I squeezed Dark's hand, and he complained.

"Alice, you're hurting me a bit."

"Be quiet. I'm mad at you."

"Have I done something to offend you?"

"...I thought you lied to me."

"Lied?"

I bit my lower lip. "*I was so sad when I thought you'd lied about your affection for me.*" No, there was no way I could be so honest.

We left the station, and I stopped to stare up at Dark's inquisitive face. Finally, I spoke.

"I'm inviting you to the Liddell estate. I want you to see just

how dangerous our investigations can be.”



DARK and I boarded the carriage Jack called for us and headed out of town toward my home.

Raindrops pattered on the roof above us. It was the only sound that echoed through our passenger cab.

After some time, we arrived at a small hill within a frame of iron fencing. The tip of each pole bore the shape of a heart.

The brown brick Liddell manor sat at the top of the hill

Our family crest was a rose, and thus, roses were planted as far as the eye could see. Green ivy stretched from the gates to the walls, and a few red roses were blooming on the garden fences.

Dark stepped down into the roundabout after me. His eyes lit up as he surveyed the grounds.

“It’s a real rose house! They’re all so red and beautiful.”

“I remember you gave out blue roses at the ball you hosted.”

“Weren’t they fascinating? We used blue pigment to dye white roses. They say God was too jealous of the blue rose’s beauty, which is why the plant is no longer allowed to grow naturally.”

“You seem to take an interest in things that are forbidden.”

Jack opened the front doors and we entered the mansion.

The front hall was lined with grand staircases to the left and right. Sculptures of angels stood perpendicular to the red carpet, and each one held a water jug or bow, smiling in the direction of where the guests would arrive.

Above the chandelier, the ceiling was painted with heavenly images of more angels smiling against blue skies. Thorny roses lined the border of all four sides.

Dark, overwhelmed by the beautiful colors, continued down the carpet with his eyes cast upward.

“I’ve never seen a ceiling mural like this before. It makes it seem as if the ivy stretches out so far...”

“Don’t stand there.”

“Hmm?”

Just as Dark turned to look at me, an arrow grazed his cheek. It had been fired from the bow of one of the angel statues, and it hit the wall with a sharp twang.

“T-The angel shot me?”

Dark stiffened in shock.

“This house is filled with hidden traps to keep intruders from breaking in,” I calmly explained. “If you walk on the carpet without knowing what you’re looking for, you’ll be shredded to bits in an instant. If you move a little more toward the middle—”

“Like this?”

Dark took a step forward and felt the ground shift under his weight. At that moment, the iron chandelier came crashing down from above. He let out a yelp and jumped out of the way without a second to spare.

“As you can see, the chandelier falls when you do that. There are also large boulders that roll down the halls, trapdoors in the study floor that’ll send you into the dungeons, and more. Would you like to see?”

Dark smiled grimly and cast aside his cane, which had been crushed under the chandelier.

“I don’t care to die today, so I think I’ll stay away. You have a lovely home, but with this many traps, hosting a party here would probably end in bloodshed.”

“I’ve never hosted a party and have no such intention, so don’t worry about that. These traps were built just after my birth. They serve as an important lesson.”

I approached Dark, minding the safe spots on the ground I’d memorized over time, and took his hand.

“*‘Never forget that death is always just around the corner.’* The Liddells have spent generations executing sinners, and that’s earned us a lot of contempt along the way.”

The chandelier rose back up automatically, rattling loudly as it went. I would have to return the arrow in the wall to its angel later.

Dark cast his eyes over each fixture in the room.

“You have to rely on such dangerous traps just to protect your own safety.”

“That’s right. In this house, we’re taught that even making friends could lead to betrayal and, ultimately, our deaths.”

The “Alice” in the game is a desperately lonely girl. Without Jack and the others, she would have no one at all. It saddens her at times, but she never shows it outwardly, as she knows it is a weakness that could be exploited. Thus, I couldn’t show any of that weakness if I wanted to protect my family. I didn’t think Dark

would be able to understand.

"You really don't have any friends?" he responded in a quiet voice.

He sounded so timid and sad that I couldn't help but scowl at him.

"That's what I said."

"I see... But you can't be certain you'll have to live exactly like your predecessors. To think that being born into this family means a life without friends or parties...it's just too cruel."

"Cruel? Don't be silly!" I snapped and went off on him. "I'm just fulfilling the duties that have been passed down to me. It's neither a blessing nor a curse. As the daughter of a baron, I have to live the same life as my father, all while doing enough work to pass on our fortune to the next generation. Isn't it the same for you now that you're an earl?!"

"You're wrong, Alice. Her Majesty didn't intend for you to live a baron's life as a woman. Your family may still be noble, but the title doesn't belong to anyone until you find a man to inherit it. Until then, there's no need for you to play the role of executioner just because it was your father's line of work. You should be able to leave your home freely and pursue whatever makes you happy."

Dark held up a section of my hair and pressed it to his lips in a kiss.

"...Alice, that's why I want to give you that happiness."

"!"

A small gasp slipped out of my mouth at his touch.

When Dark touched me, I felt all my resolve start to melt away, even though I had sworn to live a life of blood and shadows—all to protect the kingdom and my family.

"...Regardless, if you're a pacifist who seeks the police's help to solve this case, then we have very different stances on things. Perhaps you should give up while you can."

"I wouldn't call myself a pacifist."

Dark let go of my hair and turned toward the window. Lightning shot through the cloudy sky. The rain was now pouring rivers against the walls of the house.

"Looks like it's turned into a real storm. I don't suppose I could stay here and have a cup of tea until it calms down?"

"Very well. Could you quickly prepare some tea, Jack?"

"Right. Lord Knightley, may I take your coat and hat?"

Jack walked up to Dark's back and reached out for his jacket. He tried to remove it, but Dark scowled and waved him off.

"I'd rather leave them on. Don't cause a fuss."

"...My apologies."

Jack spoke politely, but he shot a glare at Dark before retreating into a back room.



I led Dark to the conservatory and was met with a shocking sight.

"What happened here...?"

Everything on top of the long dining table was a terrible mess.

Scones and slices of cake were stacked high atop dishes of all sizes. Knives and forks stuck out of the milk pitcher. A large lid, which would usually be in the kitchen with its matching pot, was covered in a pile of precariously balanced sugar cubes. An old oven mitt was wrapped around the teapot. It looked like the very picture of chaos.

The guest of honor at this unsightly tea party was none other than Hisui, the servant from the Knightley residence. Dum and Dee were on either side of him, and a gigantic pudding sat on a platter in front of their seats.

The twins raised their forks cheerfully when they saw me.

"Welcome home, our dear Alice!" they cried out together.

"Thank you, Dum and Dee. Why are the two of you having tea with Dark's servant?"

"Hisui is our friend from long ago."

"We fought him many times at the dueling arena."

The Tweedles used to entertain audiences with their dueling shows. It was an opportunity for guests to bet money on the duels' winners, losers, survivors, and fatalities. If the twins had fought him before, that meant Hisui was a fellow duelist. Perhaps his resurrection even happened after a particularly violent battle.

I decided to greet him as a formal guest, so I held my skirt and curtsied.

"I'm glad you could join us, Mr. Hisui. I am Alice, the current head of the Liddell family."

"Nice to be meeting you. Are you, too, a stigmata?"

I stared into his purple eyes and smiled. That was a question I

never thought I would have to answer in my own home.

Hisui sniffed at the air, and Dark began scolding him like a parent.

“Now, now, Hisui. Isn’t it your job to do as I ask at all times?”

“My lord... That man has the same smell as the twins.”

He was looking at Leeds, who was disassembling the sugar cube mountain on the side of the table.

Dark just slumped his shoulders in defeat. His servant appeared to be a bit of a free spirit.

“Can you please inform me before you go out to meet with old friends? I thought you were on duty when I left the mansion, but I was being followed all day. I couldn’t even visit the secret parlor where nobles go to share information. It wasn’t easy, giving them the slip.”

“Dark, did you go to the police station to get rid of the person tailing you?”

“How else could I have gotten away from them?”

He gave me a satisfied smirk, and I knew I’d been had.

Dark went to the police station to throw off his tail. He must have been talking to that officer in the interrogation room to make it look like he was there on official business. Without a pretense like that, he knew he’d just be thrown back out onto the streets.

He was a calculating, courageous, intelligent man. Not to mention a real nuisance. I wouldn’t want to get on his bad side.

But in the game I played, he was totally clueless!

I would’ve been more prepared to handle him if I didn’t have my past-life preconceptions getting in the way. I should have researched the theory that this popular character was being rewritten in the DLC to be a clever, capable guy...

Filled with regret, I watched as Jack pushed the serving cart with a teapot on top into the conservatory. He pulled out a chair across the table from Hisui and the twins.

“You sit here, Lord Knightley. There’s no cook here today, so help yourself to cold scones. If you want something hot, I’ve made some black tea. Have a nice meal.”

Dark took his seat and watched as Jack sloshed the tea into his cup. The earl let out a dispirited cheer. “Wow. This sure looks great...”

“Don’t patronize me, you bloody... Hey! You’re that water bastard!”

“Water? Is that me?” Hisui pointed at himself as Jack stormed his way.

“Yeah, you. I lost the last battle with you, but I won’t lose again. You’re here for the twins today, so I’ll agree to a truce. I bet guarding that earl’s a real pain, so make yourself at home here.”

Unlike with Dark, Jack carefully filled Hisui’s cup with black tea. He then lifted up a basket packed with sweets from the cart.

“I baked these orange biscuits this morning. Kids, you get to taste test. Open up.”

“Aaaah!” “Aaaah!”

The twins opened their mouths up wide. Jack stuck one light-brown biscuit into each of their mouths, then set the rest down in front of Hisui. It was a real banquet of sweets.

Hisui, clearly not used to being treated as the guest of honor, timidly stuck one of the biscuits into his mouth.

“Mm. Crunchy. Delicious.”

“Good. My lady, sit down and have some tea too.”

“All right...”

I sat down at the end of the table and surveyed the lively sights before me.

The Tweedles were having a blast. Hisui was blushing as he helped himself to biscuits. Jack waited on them, trying his best to mind his manners, though the scowl on his face was obvious. Leeds took a break from watching over Dark to help himself to a cup of tea. The animosity between everyone had completely vanished.

Dark pressed his hand to his chest and gasped as he watched Hisui and the twins.

“It just warms my heart. Is this what it feels like to be a father?!”

“I’d appreciate it if you don’t declare my family as your own, thank you very much,” I declared firmly.

“So harsh,” Dark said with a laugh before taking another sip of tea. Even though he was dining at his rival’s house, he seemed to have no intention of testing anything for poison. Maybe he knew I wouldn’t resort to such dirty tricks.

I really hate this guy...

Irritated, I bit down hard into a biscuit. Even as I crunched on the overcooked dough, I still couldn’t come up with any way to win against Dark.

The rain continued through the day and straight into the night. Dark, now with his newfound paternal instincts, continued to insist that I allow him to adopt the twins. We had to bribe Hisui with sweets to take him back home, and finally, our strange tea party came to an end.



BOTH “I” and “Alice” had each experienced a tragedy in our lives.

The first instance was when I was struck by a car in my past life. The other occurred three years before I regained the memories of my reincarnation. It was an autumn night, and Alice had just turned thirteen years old.

The hour was late. Rain pelted the windows

I dashed down the dark hallways of the mansion with only the wall sconces to illuminate the way.

“Mother? Father? Where are you?!”

Searching through the house with my white nightgown lifted above my knees, I failed to find my parents no matter where I looked. Our servants had collapsed in the hallways, each of them lying motionless in a dark puddle of liquid.

The smell of iron stung at my nose, and I knew it was blood. The scent mixed with the moisture of the rain in the air. Something about it reminded me of the smell of the ocean I’d experienced during our family vacation to Sicily.

When I finally reached the landing of the stairs in our entrance hall, I spotted my maid.

“Mary, wake up! Wake up!”

Her palm felt wet as I bent down to grasp her hand. Looking closer, I saw the partially dried blood clinging to her skin like glue.

I shuddered and wiped the blood off on my nightgown. Red streaks formed against the white cloth of my dress like rose petals caught in the wind.

“What’s happening to everyone...?”

I was frozen in absolute fear. I choked back my cries as I heard footsteps approaching from below.

“Who’s there?!”

“It’s Jack, my lady!”

Jack, one of our servants, appeared at the landing. He wore his

sword belt fastened over his pajamas. Jack had served as my father's page when I was little and was like a caring older brother to me throughout my whole life.

All servants of the Liddell family received combat training so that they were prepared for any situation. With his many years of training, Jack knew how to keep a calm demeanor, but he was clearly disturbed to see the blood on my clothes.

"Have you been hurt?"

"I'm fine. This is Mary's blood. She's... She's dead..."

I was heartbroken at the thought of never being able to speak with Mary again, but I knew that clinging to her body wouldn't bring her back. Death was a path that no one could return from.

"I can't find Mother and Father. Have you seen them?"

"No, I haven't. There was no one at the emergency escape route in the garden either. But I'm sure they made it to safety," he insisted and extended his hand out to me. "My lady, I shall protect you with my life. Can you stand?"

"Yes."

I rose from the ground, and Jack led me downstairs by the hand. As I turned my head to take one last parting look at Mary, I saw a shadow dart past.

Is someone here...?

With a gulp, I squinted up toward the upper floor, where the light of the chandelier didn't reach.

Thunder rattled the walls. A flash of light tore through the sky. In that instant, I saw a figure illuminated—it was a man of otherworldly size.

He must have been three times my height. At first, I thought I was going insane from fear, but the farther up I looked, the more I could see his horrifying stature, reaching up toward the dark ceiling.

I froze again. Jack realized something was wrong and quickly moved in front of me.

He pointed the tip of his sword at the man.

"Who the hell are you?!" he shouted.

"...Ah... Ahhh..."

The man bellowed out as he began to descend the staircase. With each loud step he took, we could hear a wet squelch from underneath his feet.

Finally, he emerged from the darkness and stepped into the

orange glow of the candlelight.

“...!”

I quickly covered my mouth before I could scream. I heard Jack gulp.

Illuminated by the light, I saw the man's grotesque, sinewy face. His body had been painted red in blood, and drops trickled off him with each step.

That man was neither a servant nor a member of the Liddell family. There was no mistaking that he was an intruder.

“...A...Ahh...Alice...”

His voice stung my ears as he called my name. It sounded like metal grinding against metal.

My reflection filled his dark, empty eyes.

He came here for me!

Upon that realization, I leaped out from behind Jack and ran in the opposite direction. The man bolted past Jack's arm and trailed behind me.

“That's right! Follow me!”

I descended the stairs and reached the main hall, treading over the carpet and trying not to look over my shoulder.

If I lure the intruder outside the mansion, I can save Jack and any of the other servants that are still alive... Mother and Father too!

My destination was the front door sitting ajar across the room. I would lead him out of the house, and then...

While lost in thought about my plan, I suddenly felt something strange under my foot.

It's one of the trap spots!

I had forgotten entirely. Everything except the center of the carpet in the main hall was rigged. My parents and Mary always warned me so many times.

My eyes shot upward. The chandelier, wrapped in many layers of glass and crystal ornaments, was already on its way down.

“Miss Alice!”

Jack ran toward me, casting his sword to the ground and wrapping his body around mine. At first, the tips of the ornaments merely grazed his back, but all too quickly, the sharp candlesticks were piercing his body. I felt them enter me also.

For just a moment, I heard a pained breath against my ear.

Forgive me, Jack...

Our bodies were crushed there together.

After that point, my memories are hazy.

I believe I heard fragments of the chandelier raining down, as well as the sound of the intruder's footsteps approaching me.

My body was ripped to shreds, but I felt no pain.

With what was left of me, I closed my eyes and took my final breath. Blood stained the floor around me as my mind drifted deeper into the darkness.

Ah. I guess this is where I die.

Just as I reached that realization, I heard the faint sound of a kitten's cry.

I didn't know when or where, but I felt as if it was a cry I'd heard before.



“MY lady?”

When I opened my eyes, Jack was there, staring at me with concern.

I'd been asleep in my bed and, by the feel of it, holding my breath for quite a while. I exhaled deeply.

“I was dreaming...”

The tragedy from three years earlier had resurfaced again as I slept.

“Looks like you were having a bad nightmare. You're all sweaty.”

Jack lowered himself onto the side of my bed and swept my damp bangs away from my forehead. He was wearing his butler's uniform, including the blade he kept hanging off his belt, despite the late hour.

“Are you on patrol?”

“I was just heading out, but I wanted to check on you first. You always have bad dreams on rainy nights.”

Rain poured loudly outside my window, forming white lines against the sky.

Jack scowled at the sight. “It's gonna wash away all the new roses. This is why I hate water.”

“If it's cleanup you're worried about, I'll help you. The whole family can tidy up the petals together.”

Family. Just speaking the word was a comfort to me.

After the tragedy, Jack and I were the only two souls brought back to life by the passing demon.

It couldn't undo the grief of losing my entire family that night, but now I had Dum, Dee, Leeds, and even Bear to pay me surprise visits from time to time. As long as they stayed with me, I could carry on without drowning in a pool of tears. It didn't mean I wasn't still lonely, deep down in my heart, but Dark was the only one who knew about that.

"When the garden is in order, let's bring out a table and host a tea party. We could even invite Mr. Hisui. I'm sure Dark would tag along, but if it's nothing more than tea, I don't think it will be any harm..."

"My lady... You should stay away from him."

"Why? I know we're competing against him, but I can't be rude to the man."

Jack shook his head as soon as I responded.

"Something feels off whenever I look at him... During that weird tea party today, I felt as if this wasn't the first time we'd met."

"You two come from very different backgrounds. Where would you have met?"

The people of this kingdom are strictly separated by status. Commoners live among commoners, while the nobles form relationships with other nobles. But commoners and nobles don't often interact, as their lives and even residential areas are drastically different.

"I don't remember exactly. I haven't forgotten anything that happened after I was resurrected, so it must have been long before I went to the East End..."

He inhaled deeply as if he was desperate to fill his lungs.

"I just don't trust that earl. He's never come back from the dead, but he knows enough about stigmata to recognize them, right?"

"That's because Mr. Hisui is his servant. He's seen that man's power and knows it exists in others as well."

"Even if he knows a single stigmata, there'd be no reason to think there are more of us out there. And why does he want us to work with him, even though he doesn't know the first thing about us? Is that just how badly he wants to be with you?"

Jack plunged his sword in and out of its sheath—a familiar

sign that he was deep in thought.

“At first, I assumed he developed feelings for you after seeing you reclaim your family’s status all on your own. But maybe that was just for show, and he’s really after the Liddell family business instead.”

“That can’t be...”

The Liddells’ secret operations were reliant on the goodwill of those controlling the stigmata. If a selfish person were to take on the same work, every righteous soul in the kingdom would suddenly have to watch their backs.

Say that I ended up marrying a man who turned out to be evil. He would inherit the business and be able to use Jack and the others for his own gain. There would be no punishment for him, even if he chose to eliminate anyone who got in his way.

“You shouldn’t worry about that, Jack. Her Majesty wouldn’t allow anyone to conspire against the kingdom like that.”

“But he’s already on her good side. She’s the one who introduced him to you, remember? He’s only nice to you so he can manipulate you. Promise me you won’t let him steal your heart.”

I couldn’t look Jack in the eyes, even though he was only asking me to be cautious.

If Dark had really been eyeing the Liddells for some time, he would know that a young girl was running the household without much support. Proposing marriage to that girl would be a means of taking her estate for himself.

It certainly sounded like something a nobleman would do. But still...

I don’t want to believe that Dark is a bad person...

Casting doubt on him was natural for someone who had to constantly be wary of everyone around her.

I understood that much, but my heart refused to accept it.

It felt like I was dangling on a string. My lungs refused to obey my brain. If my emotions were vivid and colorful, this feeling was cold and transparent—heavy as stone, yet weightless as air.

I could barely breathe as I lay in my bed.

I don’t understand what this is...

“He’s no normal earl, my lady. That’s why...”

Jack leaned in close to me. My body went stiff, as for a moment, I thought he was about to kiss me. His childlike face filled my vision entirely.



“...you shouldn’t try to get close to him on your own. Got it?”

“O-Okay. I’ll be careful...!”

All I could do was nod like a puppet.

And yet Jack continued to stare at me with what could only be described as love in his eyes before he sat up without touching me.

Huh?

I was living in the world of an otome game. I was the heroine, and Jack was a love interest.

Even without the usual game choices appearing, there was no reason we couldn’t fall in love. I was certain of that much, and yet, for some reason, he didn’t try to kiss me.

“All right, I need to start my patrol. Good night, my lady, and sleep well.”

“Good night...”

I watched with disappointment as Jack left the room. Once the door was closed again, I let out a groan.

I can’t make Jack fall for me in this life...

I thought I was raising my affection with him at the coffeehouse, but then the carriage accident happened.

When I tried to pursue a relationship with him, the game seemed to determine I’d made the wrong choice in the story, and then “Alice” was sent on her way to a bad ending—one where she might not make it out alive.

No matter how much I care about you, we’ll never get to be together...

Jack was the boy I declared my “absolute favorite otome game character” in my previous life. I played his route so many times, and it never once failed to make my heart flutter. This reality was just too cruel.

“Jack...”

Biting my lip, I buried my face into the soft pillow. Tears stung my eyes.

“...I loved you, you know. I loved you so much, I thought about you every single day...”

That night, I cried silently in my room over my lost love.

Perhaps knowing of my heartbreak, the rain continued to pour through the night, drowning out the sound of my tears.

Chapter 4: Beware the Sudden Fiancée

I arrived at the police station to find a crowd gathered outside the building, preventing me from entering.

“Has something happened?”

These steps were usually swarming with reporters whenever the police announced a new case, but the men, clad in their flat caps, didn’t seem like they were there for a scoop. It wasn’t that they seemed unenthusiastic, but rather, it was as if they were all holding their breath in extreme anticipation.

“Those men don’t have cameras or notepads, so I don’t suppose they’re reporters. Maybe get-out-of-jail-free cards are going on sale today. Not that I give a hoot about that kind of thing.” Grumbling to himself, Leeds moved his hands up to rest on his slender hips.

His oversized coat wrapped around his legs, emphasizing their impressive length. As always, he stood out in a crowd, and would have done so even without his favorite bright-colored shawl around his neck.

“If only they could put out that many bounties instead.”

I approached the officer who was directing the crowd, explained our business at the precinct, and was allowed to enter the station.

There was a large stage set up in the middle of the entrance hall in front of a packed audience. The men in the front row wore headbands and festive shirts, and they held up police batons painted in bright colors.

I’ve seen things like this in my past life...

My heels clacked against the floor as I proceeded. At the end of the rope barricade, I reached the counter and spoke to the woman at the window.

“I’m here to collect a bounty.”

“We’ve been waiting to hear from you, Miss Liddell. My apologies for the crowd today. We have an event going on, you see.”

The woman working the counter was a female officer I’d

interacted with before. She seemed half apologetic and half bewildered about the ordeal, which implied that she was not on the same page as the rest of the officers.

“The police are holding an event? How unusual.”

“I suppose you could say we’re trying something new to—”

Her words were suddenly drowned out by a chorus of cheers.

I turned to look at the stage, where I laid eyes upon a pretty girl with light-orange pigtails. She was waving her hands and beaming at the crowd. Her two-piece suit’s pleated skirt came to her knees, and her collar and sleeves resembled a reworked police uniform.

Logically, it would have been unthinkable for a woman to expose her legs in this time period, but perhaps because this was an otome game, no one would bat an eye as long as she was dressed cutely.

“Hi, everyone! Thank you all sooo much for coming to see me today!” The girl’s skirt twirled around her legs as she did a little spin. “My name is Tierra Lockholmes, the girl detective. I’m here to protect the public order of London!”

The girl—Tierra—winked and struck a pose, prompting a ground-rattling roar from all the men. The sight made me gasp in realization.

“Of course!”

I had seen this before on a TV show in my previous life. This scene looked exactly like that Sunday night news special about idols, particularly the shot of the fans cheering for their favorite underground idol as she greeted them from the stage.

“...‘Protect the public order’... Pfft!” Leeds covered his mouth and turned away from me, but unable to contain his snickering, he burst into a loud belly laugh. “Goodness gracious, it sounds like a riot’s going on in here! What a silly event they’re holding! These officers put zoo animals to shame!”

“Leeds, be quiet. That’s rude,” I chastised him.

But instead of siding with me, the female officer responded to Leeds, saying, “You’re exactly right. I wish I could tell them to keep the noise down, but that girl is the police chief’s daughter, so there’s not much I can do about it. This ‘public order rally’ was organized out of the blue too.”

“It must be hard to work with this going on...”

“I need your help to keep London safe, okay?” Tierra called

out to the crowd with a voice as sweet as honey. “After this, you’ll be able to take a picture with me. One picture is half a guinea, and for a whole guinea, I’ll even autograph it for you! Now, who’s first?”

Tierra occasionally sprinkled information about her photograph sessions into what was supposed to be a rally to promote public order. It was a rather obvious money grab.

One guinea was the salary for nearly a week of work for the average employee in these times, which meant an autographed photo with Tierra cost seven days’ worth of their hard-earned money all at once.

If I didn’t have memories of my past life, I might have found the whole thing extremely pointless.

But to be honest, when I got completely addicted to *Evil Alice’s Lover*, I also stocked up on key chains, wall scrolls, and all kinds of merch. Even when I purchased the fan books and character song CDs, I always bought the more expensive limited editions just because they came with bonus content.

“It’s not about the money. It’s about supporting your bias whenever the opportunity comes. I know exactly how they feel...!”

“Miss Alice? Why are you holding your fists up like that?”

Seeing me swing into “past-life mode” seemed to alarm Leeds.

“N-Never mind. May I please collect my compensation?”

“Of course. Right this way.”

The officer led me to a separate room. As we walked down the hall, I spotted a man with his back against the wall who was peering through a pair of opera glasses. His face was hidden, but I could instantly identify him from his eccentric outfit.

I honestly didn’t want to see him, so I tried to turn and navigate around him, but my skirt got caught under my feet. Before I could hit the ground, someone grabbed hold of me.

“Are you all right, Alice?”

“Yes, thank you... What brings you to the police station, Dark?”

“I’m here to see this brand-new kind of event!”

With a bit of cheer in his voice, Dark lifted me back upright.

He was wearing a blue frock coat embroidered with cage-like stripes. It was lined with a large number of buttons, which helped to give him a regal look. His hat was the same color of blue, and above the brim rested a decorative pair of handcuffs and jail bars. It

appeared to be a custom-made police-themed outfit.

“I didn’t think you’d be so taken by an underground idol.”

“I’m not familiar with this ‘underground idol’ you speak of... But I assure you, *you’re* the only one I’m taken by.”

“As smooth a talker as ever. And I suppose it’s just a coincidence that you came here with those opera glasses?”

When I pointed that out, he placed the glasses on the brim of his hat.

“I meant every word. However, today’s rally is a rather important test. You see, last month, there was an increase in theft cases. I decided to look into it and found that Miss Tierra had been working the desk here at the police station during that same month. It turned out that men were falling for her, going out and committing crimes, then coming to the station just so they could turn themselves in to her.”

“So in the end, the girl was the cause of the crimes.”

“Correct. That’s why I came up with the idea of harnessing this girl’s tremendous charm and using it to promote public order. If she takes the side of justice, won’t her fans follow in her footsteps?”

Dark appeared to be the one behind this whole affair.

“Wait. Do you and Miss Tierra know each other?”

“I’ve been familiar with her for some time now.”

“Tierra” is not a character who appears in *Evil Alice’s Lover*.

All I could conclude was that she must have been intended to be a new character in the game’s expansion pack. There were many nameless characters throughout the game that would interact with you, but if Tierra’s backstory was that she knew Dark and had the unique qualities of an idol character, there was no way she was meant to be insignificant to the plot.

A common trope of otome games is to introduce a girl of the same age as the heroine. She’s either cast as the heroine’s best friend or as her rival. But if she was the best friend type, there was no way she wouldn’t appear in the main game.

Which meant that...

Those damn developers! They snuck in a rival character to get in Alice’s way!

I stamped my foot on the ground. I was busy enough with the Sleeping Beauty cases and not triggering death flags. I had no time to worry about some silly romantic-comedy trope!

Stepping away from Dark, I applauded him softly.

“Congratulations on the success of your campaign, Lord Knightley. I came here today to claim a bounty, so if you’ll excuse me, I must be on my way.”

“Is it for the Tower of London arson? Wait, I need to talk to you about—”

Dark reached out to stop me as I turned away, but his arm froze in the air.

I saw pale fingers wrapped around his wrist.

“Lord Knightley? What’s wrong?”

It was none other than Tierra who had stopped Dark. Up close, I saw her large eyes were wet with tears, and even I couldn’t help but instinctively feel protective of her.

“You promised me you wouldn’t take your eyes off me onstage...”

With a pouty expression, she aimed her puppy-dog eyes up at Dark. Watching her flutter her long, curled eyelashes at him, I came to a realization.

This girl definitely wants to get with Dark...!

Her demeanor and mannerisms were all but perfect. She was a master of her craft, and I was no match for the likes of it.

“Look at her puffing her cheeks up like a squirrel... Pfft, ahahaha!”

Leeds! Shut up!

Her face seemed to have sent him into a laughing fit. I jabbed him with my elbow to quiet him down.

Dark gracefully unwrapped Tierra’s fingers from his arm. “I was watching you, Miss Lockholmes. You brought those men together wonderfully.”

“I did, didn’t I? I knew you’d be here for me, so I gave it my very best.”

Tierra saw no problem with latching onto Dark’s arm once again. She was definitely pressing her chest against him too. He seemed a bit bothered by it but didn’t try to force her away.

What’s with you? Just shake her off...

Tierra’s voice only got louder when I looked away in annoyance.

“My lord, who’s the girl with the red hair?”

“This is Miss Alice Liddell. She single-handedly revived the Liddell family and currently acts as its head.”

“Oh, you’re the one Lord Knightley is always talking about...”

It's so nice to meet you, Miss Liddell."

Tierra separated from Dark and stuck her hand out toward me. It was unusual to be greeted with a handshake among members of high society, as the custom was to cross one's legs and curtsy.

"My name is Tierra Lockholmes. I've been a dear friend of Lord Knightley's for a long time now."

"It's nice to meet you."

Without a thought, I put my hand forward to shake hers. To my shock, I received a scream in return.

"KYAAAH! You're hurting me!"

"Huh?"

I stood there with my mouth hanging open as she tore her hand away from mine. Hearing her scream, policemen ducked their heads into the hall, and she loudly offered an explanation.

"Miss Liddell just squeezed my hand as hard as she could! I thought my bones might break. You want to hurt me just because Lord Knightley is fond of me, don't you?!"

"I didn't squeeze your hand. I don't know how I could have hurt you."

I tried to defend myself, but I could still feel suspicious gazes burrowing into me.

No one's going to believe me, even if I accuse her of lying...

"I'm sure Miss Alice wouldn't try to hurt you." Dark spoke up just as I was about to start over.

I looked up, surprised. Dark's gaze was fixed on me. He was smiling like I was the brightest star in the night sky.

"She always treats everyone equally and respectfully. That's the kind of woman she is."

His praise made my heart skip a beat.

Tierra looked at me with disdain as I felt my face turn red.



AFTER collecting my bounty, I drifted back home to the Liddell manor. I felt like I was walking on clouds. Dark believed me over Tierra, and that made me very happy.

I slept soundly, without any nightmares to disturb me, and awoke the next morning.

My early morning tea cast off any remaining fatigue in my

body. I then changed out of my pajamas, went down for breakfast, and picked up a newspaper on the side of the table.

Nobles must always keep up with current events. Some families even fall into ruin if they can't change with the times. In a kingdom with a low literacy rate, those who are able to obtain knowledge and information are at an advantage.

Jack had woken up early to iron the newspaper. The ink was dry and my hands stayed clean as I read.

The front-page story was about the recently passed laws that aimed to improve the lives of the growing number of factory workers in the kingdom. The second page told of a shipwreck that happened on the river Thames. Finally, the third page had an article about yesterday's public order rally, along with the Sleeping Beauty cases. Tierra was mentioned in one paragraph:

As the daughter of the chief of police, Miss Lockholmes has previously participated in investigations, though her detective skills have yet to prove of value to the force.

It sounded just like the "Lord Knightley" I knew from *Evil Alice's Lover*.

Dark was a character who always acted like a detective, but he was prone to reaching ridiculous conclusions based on misinterpreting the clues. When he showed up at a crime scene, he was more of a disturbance than anything else.

Maybe Tierra Lockholmes is supposed to take over the role of the clueless detective.

Tierra might have been added as a support character to show that Dark had become capable, now that he was also a love interest...

I was deep in thought over all this when I felt the newspaper slide out of my hands. Leeds stole it from me with a feigned yawn and a stretch.

"What's got your attention there, my lady? ...Oh, it's an article about that silly rally from yesterday."

"Silly?"

"Rally?"

Dum and Dee, who were eating scones on opposite sides of the table, leaned forward in excitement at the introduction of this new topic. I was explaining to them the rally we saw when I noticed Leeds shudder next to me.

"...What is this? 'Miss Tierra is expected to announce her

engagement to Lord Knightley in the coming days.”

“Engagement...?”

“Take a look at this,” said Leeds as he handed me the newspaper. The tail end of the article about Tierra’s event made a reference to her engagement with Dark.

“I see. You’re right...”

“That dog of an earl! He proposed to Miss Alice even though he had a fiancée on the side! Just what does he think of our lady?! I’ll never forgive him!”

Leeds angrily crumpled up the newspaper. I could only watch him in a daze. This information was important for me to take in, and yet it just didn’t feel real.

“Calm your temper, Leeds. I knew that Dark had no real intention of marrying me, so if anything, this is good news. Perhaps he’ll even be the one to call off our race to solve the Sleeping Beauty cases.”

“My lady...”

Leeds’s eyes wavered as he looked down at me. I didn’t understand what had him so disturbed. I continued on without so much as a breath.

“I never wanted to marry Dark in the first place. If I did, what would happen to the Liddell family? In fact, I’m glad I found out about his fiancée. Now that I know, I... I...”

My vision grew blurrier with each word.

It felt like my tears were choosing to fall on their own.

My nose started to sting, and I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I leaned into Leeds’s side. He gently placed his hand on my head as I buried my face in his sweater.

“My lady... If only there was something I could do.”

I just shook my head silently as tears continued to fall.

Of all the situations I imagined in this life, I didn’t see myself crying in front of someone so soon.



AFTER my tears at the breakfast table, I decided I needed to spend the remainder of the day resting.

The twins had already seen everything, and when Jack came in to bring out the next pot of tea, Leeds kept his explanation just

vague enough.

“There are times when women have to get through hardships all on their own. If you want to do something for her, then let her be alone today.”

Once I was back in my bedroom, I changed into my nightgown and crawled into bed.

I simply stared ahead at the balcony before me, as I had nothing else to do.

Birds soared through the clear blue sky. Roses were just beginning to bloom from the ivy that curled around the iron railing. The tips of the buds were already showing traces of color. Soon they would be full and vibrant.

The outside world brimmed with life while I remained in my room, feeling like a prisoner trapped in a cage.

Even the air in the room seemed hazy. Perhaps it was because my breathing had gone shallow from the earlier shock, or maybe the air was still heavy from the tragic night of three years earlier, when the house was stained with blood from floor to ceiling.

Dark probably has no idea that my red hair and eyes can look so dim.

A charming, upbeat girl like Tierra suited a bright, glowing man like Dark.

“I already knew that. So why did I even get my hopes up...?”

I slipped out of bed and walked out onto the balcony. London, where the game is set, is located at a higher latitude than Sapporo, Japan. That meant going outside at the beginning of spring in pajamas would definitely end with me catching a cold.

The wind was chilly against my skin, but it was just what I needed to cool my head.

As I clutched the railing and took a few deep breaths, I heard a voice calling me from the garden. I looked down and spotted Jack. He was sweeping up the flower petals within the maze of shrubbery.

I felt too awkward to face him, so I turned away, only to be met with more shouts.

“Don’t run! I won’t ask what happened, but can I at least bring you some warm black tea later?”

“Black tea?”

“I’ll just pour you a cup. You don’t have to speak to me, and I’ll leave right after that.”

Jack seemed to be worried about me while also trying not to push me past my limits. He was acting nonchalant, but it was still such a kind gesture, it warmed my heart. I turned to smile at him.

“That sounds lovely. It’s funny, I was just thinking how much I’d like a cup of your black tea.”

“I’ll make it right away!”

Jack rushed out of the garden and into the house.

It usually took him fifteen minutes to brush the dirt off his shoes, wash his hands, pump water from the well, and put the kettle on until it reached a boil. Then he always warmed up the teacup, measured out the tea leaves, poured in the water, and waited for it to steep over the next five minutes.

But Jack was efficient, so I knew he would also spend that time taking out snacks and preparing the serving cart. It should be twenty minutes before he reached my room.

I spent that time at my writing desk, sorting out a stack of mail.

One letter came from a church in the county of Cornwall. Unlike most nobles, the Liddells didn’t control any land themselves, but we did have bases throughout the kingdom that helped us pursue criminals.

This church was one such base. We paid them for their help every year in the form of a charitable donation.

The letter read: *Please enjoy some homemade goods from the children in our care. We will be sending you Easter biscuits and Cornish rock cakes, a traditional sweet from our county.*

I was happy to receive both treats. Baked goods topped with English toffee sauce were a favorite of mine.

“If these sweets have arrived, perhaps I can have them with my tea.”

I went downstairs and poked my head into the kitchen, but froze when I heard an angry yell from Jack.

“How could they send these to Miss Alice?!”

“Calm down, Jack. Those kids would never pull a cruel prank like this!”

“What’s wrong, you two?”

Jack looked like he would erupt into flames at any moment. As I entered, Bear’s large body shrunk a little in surprise. With synchronized motions, the pair quickly tried to hide the wooden crate sitting on the counter.

“Isn’t that the package from the church?”

I leaned forward to peer into the box and was met with a terrible sight.

The wrapping paper had been torn to shreds and the baked goods inside were thoroughly smashed. That state alone could have been explained by a shipping mishap, but the entire package was stained red with some kind of liquid. There was no mistake—this was done intentionally.

The box looked like the scene of a massacre, but upon closer inspection, it didn’t have the distinctive metallic smell to it.

“It...isn’t blood. It looks like red ink.”

I examined the lid and found an extra set of holes where nails had once been hammered in.

“Someone opened this box before us. They removed the nails, tampered with the contents, sealed the lid again, and sent it off to our estate. Is this the invoice?”

I lifted the paper attached to the lid and read the message.

Stay away from Lord Knightley if you value your life!

“Again with that earl? He’s a bloody pain...”

“The earl? What earl?”

Jack was irritated and Bear was just confused. I looked closer at the brief message.

The text itself had been printed onto the card, and each letter a was slightly broken.

I can imagine many young women would want to threaten me since I’m close to Dark, but the timing of this is certainly suspicious...

One girl in particular came to mind, but I didn’t want to jump to conclusions. I needed to wait until I found solid evidence before sounding the alarms.

“It’s too bad we won’t have any sweets, but I’d still like to have some tea. Jack?”

“Y-Yeah... I’ll make it now.”

Jack forced down his anger so he could get started on my request. I watched him scoop tea leaves, and Bear offered me some of his freshly baked muffins. The sweet scent of vanilla in the air lightened my mood like a color suffusing a white rose. Even though I’d just received a threat, I felt neither fear nor anxiety, thanks to these two men.

In fact, I was all too happy to be given a new case to focus on.

Never mind all those tears—this is the life that truly suits me. Isn't that right, "Alice"?



"I certainly can't think of anyone who would want to threaten you. If I knew of such a foul creature, I wouldn't hesitate to expose them to the world."

"You really wouldn't, would you...?"

Dark sipped his tea while I stared at him and rested my chin in my hands.

We were currently in a tearoom in Oxford Circus. It was known as a place even women could enter freely. The sedate interior was decorated in ivory white.

Dark agreed to meet me there when I contacted him. I had much to ask about the threat I received, so Leeds was also there as a chaperone to watch over us from a distance.

I had asked him to come dressed in a more conservative outfit, and indeed, he was wearing a black frock coat with dark embroidery this time. He looked plain enough at first glance... except for the top hat with giant deer antlers sticking out of it like a hunting trophy on his head.

I bet he wants me to comment on it. I won't give him the satisfaction!

I swallowed the complaints I was desperate to make. A group of commoner girls nearby were gazing at Dark, completely spellbound. I pitied them a bit. They had no idea he was a complete weirdo behind that beautiful exterior.

Dark was busy staring at the letter. He never gave the girls a single glance, and my pity only increased.

"It's quite intriguing. We could have done a handwriting analysis on the sample, but since it was printed onto the card, we won't be able to track down the sender. I don't think it would be worth the effort to check with every printing company either. They must have thought this through. Alice, I'm sure you're scared to have this culprit on the loose. Just say the word and I will be by your side."

"I'm quite fine, thank you. I'm no stranger to receiving threats."

I meant it as a casual comment, but Dark looked at me curiously.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I receive harassing letters almost every day, all from young women who are less than fond of me. Some letters have razor blades inside, and others claim to be curses to bring about my death... I’ve even been shipped live snakes before.”

Even I was shocked to see the box filled with coiled snakes. I’d heard in my previous life that those white snakes were actually a good omen, so I kindly said my thanks and set them loose in the nearby woods.

Dark didn’t seem to care for reptiles. He shuddered and rubbed his arms. “What a fright, just thinking about it... And what do the Liddells do with such letters?”

“We usually return them to the sender, though it takes a lot of restraint not to pursue it any further. These young women typically get someone in their families to do it for them, so even without an address, it’s easy to tell where they came from. And when we can’t tell, we search for clues to find them.”

I thought back to the crushed batch of cookies.

They were made with love by the children who lived at that church. Destroying them to get back at a romantic rival was going much too far. I wouldn’t be satisfied until I tracked down the sender and received a proper apology.

“That reminds me. There was an article about you in the newspaper.”

I set my teacup down on the table and opened the wrinkled newspaper. I drew his attention to page three, which displayed the article about the public order rally.

“It says you’ll be announcing your engagement to Miss Tierra soon. I’m surprised to hear you’re marrying a commoner, but you have my congratulations. I wish you two happiness.”

“Wait a moment, Alice.” Dark set the letter down on top of the newspaper and clasped my hand. “You’ve got it all wrong. Miss Tierra and I aren’t getting married.”

“Are you saying the reporter made a mistake?”

“I don’t mean to put all the blame on him, but his fact-checking skills appear a bit lacking. His only source was a rumor started by Miss Tierra’s father. I assume he was getting a bit ahead of himself after he purchased his life peerage. When the reporters

came to confirm it with me, I denied the rumor.”

In this game, there are two kinds of nobility a person can obtain. The Liddell and Knightley families hold titles that can be passed down to future generations, called “hereditary peerage,” while certain commoners can be rewarded for their good deeds with what is known as “life peerage.”

Life peerage can also be purchased with money in the game, which means a commoner could spend their whole life saving up for a title. It was a way to present an image of success to the world. Some life peers even tried to marry their way into families of hereditary peerage.

According to what I was hearing, the wealthy and single Dark had become a target for Tierra’s parents.

“How unfortunate for you. But I wouldn’t make as foolish a mistake as that reporter. Your words alone aren’t enough for me to believe you.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you. You’re the one who has my heart...”

Dark took my hand and gently pressed his lips to my fingers as if we were lovers. Then came a chorus of shrieks from the girls who had been watching us. Embarrassed, I tugged my hand away.

“Y-Your heart doesn’t belong to me. It’s yours! You should place more value on your own heart.”

“Hahaha. How like you to turn me down so bluntly.”

Dark raised his hands in resignation and flashed a smile at the nearby girls. He’d clearly noticed their stares and utilized me to ward off their unwanted attention.

This man is prepared for everything...

I angrily reached out to fold the newspaper back up when I spotted something curious.

With the invoice and article now side by side, I was able to compare the two texts with each other.

“The death threat and the article both have the same cracked letter...”

Both passages had been produced with a printing press—a machine that allowed the writer to arrange sentences into a fixed molding. That mold could create large batches of identical text in a short amount of time.

Each press belonged to a specific print shop. If the letter *a* was chipped in both texts, it meant the death threat and the newspaper were printed at the same location.

"This newspaper lists the address of their printer. Now I'll be able to track down who wrote this threat!"

"Wait, Alice."

As I stood to leave, Dark stuck out his cane to block my exit.

"You expect to just show up and receive the culprit's name from the employees? They'd be admitting their culpability in the same crime."

"I'm quite certain I can get it out of them. After all, it's the only clue I have in this case."

"If it's a clue you want, then I have something of a hunch we could look into."

"You do?!"

I sat there shocked while Dark took his time to finish his cup of black tea.

"...By the way, Alice. Would you be opposed to taking a walk around town with me?"

"Is this really the right time? I want to hear about this hunch of yours."

"I'd gladly explain it, but only if you spend a bit of time with me first. I can't just give away my information for free. Wouldn't you do the same in my shoes?"

"~~!"

Dark grinned at me. I felt like my head was going to explode from anger.

He was using this hunch about the death threat as a way to get me on a date. I needed to keep my cool and not let him fluster me.

Forcing away the urge to slap him right upside the head, I brushed my hair off my shoulder.

"I suppose I could accompany you on a walk, but I'll expect to hear about your hunch in return!"

"Of course. Shall we head out?"

Dark stood up and began to escort me toward the door. I glanced over at Leeds, who was still sitting some distance away. He stuck out his index finger and dragged it across his neck.

I know how you feel, but just bear with it a bit longer.

Whether or not my feelings managed to reach him, Leeds reluctantly left his chair and followed us.



WE departed from Oxford Circus and headed for Holywell Street.

Dark and I stood in a damp, dim alley, tucked behind a stack of wine barrels. A drunk man was sprawled out on the ground not too far from us. I didn't get the impression that it was a particularly safe area.

"Why are we here?"

"Shh. There, look."

I followed Dark's finger with my eyes, and my gaze landed upon a short person entering a bookstore across the street. She was dressed in an old baggy sweater, and though her hair was tucked neatly under a large hat, I could spot the familiar color of a few strands that fell down her back.

Tierra Lockholmes?

Less than three minutes after entering the shop, she emerged again, holding a paper bag in her arms. Once Tierra jogged past the alley where we were hiding, I shot Dark a demanding look.

"There's no need to glare at me. We'll go in and see for ourselves."

He led me into the bookstore. The interior was dimly lit and filled with old editions of magazines I'd never seen before. *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*, the manual for working-class families, was spread out on display.

"Wait here for a moment."

Dark had me stand by the door while he went to the front counter. The shopkeeper was an older man who was smoking a cigarette as he manned his post.

"Good evening, sir. Do you have any *special products* I could take a look at?"

"Special products? What do you mean?"

"I think you know what I mean. A friend of mine said I could find them here...but maybe he was wrong?"

He hung his head in feigned disappointment. The shopkeeper glanced at Dark's cane. It was a fine piece of work, with the head carved into the shape of a white horse with sapphire beads for eyes. The cane was also a clear display of Dark's social status.

After a few seconds of inspection, the shopkeeper asked, "You mean...Marianne?"

A woman's name?

I leaned in to listen, curious as to who they were talking about.

"That's it! That was her name. I heard she's quite a beauty."

"Oh, there's no doubt about it. But I just had a customer in here who bought out all the back issues, so I'm completely sold out. Sorry about that, but I can't help you, so please be off now."

It sounded like the magazines he wanted were sold out. Even though we could have gone to another shop to look for them, Dark stood firmly in front of the counter, even as the shopkeeper shooed him away.

"Don't be so cold. I'm willing to pay whatever you want, so name your price."

As Dark began to negotiate, I opened up a nearby book to hide behind while I watched them nervously.

Didn't he just say he's out of stock? You're just bothering him now, Dark!

I was considering how to get him to leave when the shopkeeper broke into a smile and began to stroke his mustache.

"And here I thought you were just another naïve kid from a rich family. Looks like you've actually got a proper head on your shoulders."

He reached under the counter and brought out a stack of magazines.

So he's not sold out?!

I was shocked, but Dark and the shopkeeper continued on as if the magazines had been right there the whole time.

"Marianne's only in these three editions."

"I'll take one of each, and no receipt, please."

"Obviously! Now be sure you're alone when you read these, and if anyone asks, you didn't get them here."

"Don't worry about that. My lips are sealed."

Dark placed a hefty pile of silver coins into the shopkeeper's hand.

Cradling the paper bag just like Tierra, he exited the shop with me and flagged down a carriage on the street. I sat down on the hard seat and turned to Dark, who was sitting beside me with his legs crossed.

"What was all the secrecy about? They were just magazines. And who's Marianne?"

"...I don't really want to show you this, but..."

Dark removed a magazine from the paper bag. There was a large image of a woman printed on the cover.

The model's curves were very accentuated, and she bore a

seductive expression on her face. Her body was clad in an almost entirely transparent dress, with her chest just about exposed through the fabric.

I felt the blood drain from my face in the realization that I was very nearly looking at something obscene.

“C-C-C-Could this be...”

“Indeed. It’s an adult magazine for men.”

“How could that bookshop sell these?! Aren’t they illegal?!”

“You’re right. The production and sale of these magazines are illegal. But this company makes them because there’s such a high demand. Holywell Street is famous for the underground bookstores that sell these ‘treasures.’ Even noblemen like myself have heard of them.”

“If they’re so famous, why haven’t they been exposed yet?” I asked.

“Because they’re allowed to operate. The current chief of police has a bit of an appetite for bribery, so both the producers and distributors are paying him off. Now, let’s find our Marianne...”

Dark calmly flipped through the pages. I covered my face with my hands but continued to glance over, only to be met with the sight of even more bare skin.

How are you reading that right now?! I can’t believe this!

“Before you start to think even less of me, I should tell you that men of my age don’t have a problem with this kind of thing.”

“Did you just read my mind again?!”

“I didn’t need to. I could tell either way. Look, this is her.”

I was still in shock as Dark held up the magazine for me to view.

He had landed on a two-page spread of a beautiful girl posing in a seductive manner.

“That’s Tierra Lockholmes...”

Dark opened up the next two magazines. Again, there were images of her smiling provocatively, wearing skimpy tops, and hiking up her skirt.

However, Tierra’s name was clearly listed as “Marianne.”

“She goes by ‘Marianne’ as her alias?”

“It’s more like her stage name. Miss Tierra’s been modeling for cash in these illegal magazines. Ever since she earned some fame with her public order rally, she’s most likely been buying them up to hide the evidence. But when she asked for all the copies, I

assume the shopkeeper took advantage of her naivety and set some aside to sell to other customers.”

“So both father and daughter are caught up in crime. How long have you known about this?”

“Since before I met her... Oh, here it is. See these letters?”

Dark pointed at what appeared to be an interview with Marianne. Each letter *a* on the page was cracked, exactly like the death threat and the newspaper.

“This magazine is made by the same printing company that handles the newspaper. Since they also employ these models for their illegal productions, I’m sure they wouldn’t go to the police over an order for a death threat.”

“This links Tierra to that threat... Dark, this is incredible!” Excited, I gave my compliments to the earl. “May I borrow this magazine?”

He promptly closed it shut and whisked the magazine away from my hand. “Once again, this is an illegal men’s magazine. I think it’d be a bit much for you.”

“There’s no need to worry. As a woman, I won’t be offended by drawings of the same sex.”

“I wonder about that...”

In response to my protests, Dark opened one of the magazines and held it up for me.

“By the way, here’s another page of Marianne’s.”

It was filled with drawings of naked female figures. She was bound with chains and handcuffs in some of them, while others had her clad in only a single apron. She even wore fake animal ears in some poses.

How unthinkable! How obscene! How disgusting! My head was reeling and I cried out in shock.

“Gyaaaaaah!”

“I thought as much. I’ll be holding on to these, Alice.”

“All right! I understand! Just close that magazine and seal it away where I can never see it again!”

“Of course...”

He smirked as he wrapped the magazines back up in the paper bag and set them on the seat. I didn’t particularly want to be anywhere near that package, so I exited the carriage in a hurry as soon as we arrived at the Liddell estate.

Dark leaned out of the carriage to face me.

"I'll hold on to these magazines for you, so just send for me if you need them. All right?"

With that deal settled, the carriage pulled away. Now that I was alone, I let my body sink to the ground.

"H-How horrifying..."

Seeing how exhausted I was when I returned, Jack and the others couldn't help but look at me with worry on their faces.



"THAT Miss Liddell is simply awful. When she asked for a handshake, she grabbed me and wrenched my hand with all her might. It was so painful, I screamed right there on the spot!"

Tierra was borrowing a duchess's drawing-room to host a tea party. She captivated her audience with sweetly spun tales about her encounter with Alice a few days earlier.

Young ladies were gathered to discuss the thrilling love triangle between Lord Knightley, whom they so admired, the beautiful Miss Tierra, whose life was going so well lately, and the young head of the Liddell family, who always seemed to be a topic of conversation.

"Why on earth would Miss Liddell attack you, Miss Tierra?"

"I suspect she was jealous to see me with my fiancé."

"You mean Lord Knightley, yes? I read about you two in the newspaper."

"That's right. We hadn't even made the formal announcement, yet he still thought to embrace me in front of everyone at the police station... I was so embarrassed that we were found out in such a manner."

Tierra covered her face with her feathery pink fan. Without it, she would be making it all too obvious that she wasn't actually ashamed whatsoever. She was too busy basking in the jealousy of the other girls in the room and couldn't seem to get the smirk off her face.

Go ahead and envy me. I'll still be the one marrying an earl in the end!

In her head, Tierra was already the proud wife of Lord Knightley, laughing maniacally at all the other girls. She would live with him in a lavish castle, have dozens of servants to wait on her,

and purchase all the expensive dresses and accessories that she wanted. What wasn't there to laugh about?

On top of that, her future husband was beautiful beyond words, and a famous earl with a hereditary peerage at that. He was a true gentleman who remained humble despite all this. Lord Knightley was the ultimate package.

It's the perfect plan to secure the future I deserve. Now, if only I could get rid of that girl...

Tierra believed she could seduce Lord Knightley just as easily as any other man—that a single enticing glance would surely have him in the palm of her hand. But all that changed on the day of the public order rally.

As soon as she laid eyes on Alice and the earl, even from a distance, she could see the tenderness in his gaze as he looked at her. His eyes were fixed on Alice and his lips formed a natural smile that made him look so content.

He's never looked at me that way before...

Tierra had witnessed something “special” between the two of them. Instinctively, she knew she would have to tear them apart, no matter what means that might entail.

She immediately ordered the death threat from a printing shop she'd worked with before, seduced the postal worker in charge of deliveries, and tampered with the box from the church.

But threatening Alice wasn't enough—Tierra needed to be sure she could never show her face in high society again.

“I started to receive these letters recently. The sender is clearly jealous of Lord Knightley's love for me.”

Tierra laid out a number of the death threats she'd created herself. The other girls picked them up, their faces twisting in suspicion as they read.

“These are just dreadful. You don't think Miss Liddell sent them, do you?”

“I don't know for sure, but I can't think of anyone else it could be...”

She let her words trail off intentionally. From there, it took less than ten seconds for the girls to become even more suspicious of Alice, just as Tierra intended.

“I'm frightened of what might happen once Lord Knightley and I are together. That girl is capable of anything!”

The entire drawing-room was captivated by what was actually

her impressive acting, but at that moment, the large door on the south wall creaked open.

“I’ve heard enough.”

There stood Alice in one of her jet-black dresses, holding a dark, lacy folding fan in one hand. Beside her stood a thin man with a bright shawl around his neck.

“What an interesting fantasy you’ve whipped up, Miss Lockholmes.”

“M-Miss Liddell...!”

The group of women immediately cleared a path for her, the blood draining from their faces. Tierra shouted out for the policeman that was standing guard in the next room.

“Only my friends are allowed to attend today. Take her away!”

“Yes, ma’am. Please be on your way.”

The officer crossed his bulky arms and blocked Alice from proceeding. He would likely have to physically remove her if she refused, but Alice continued to stand there, smirking at Tierra.

“We’ll leave once we clear up this misunderstanding. Leeds?”

“Yes, my lady. Hey there, mister. Can I have a second?”

Leeds waved and approached the officer. He leaned his tall body over to whisper into the man’s ear.

“I place you under my command. We are legitimate guests here.”

The man’s posture immediately changed. His shoulders slumped forward and his arms dangled loosely. Ignoring the murmurs from Tierra and the ladies, he repeated Leeds’s words back with hollow eyes.

“I am under your command...”

“Wh-What are you on about?! Get ahold of yourself!”

He showed no reaction to Tierra’s cries.

“You will wait outside until we leave.”

The officer followed Leeds’s orders, turned, and left the room, his body swaying from side to side with each step. When the door closed behind him, Leeds stuck his tongue out playfully in that direction.

The same rose-shaped stigma that Jack possessed was visible on Leeds’s tongue. It was his power as a stigmata, known as “Liar’s Tongue,” which he was able to use in this state.

Liar's Tongue was a way of controlling a person's thoughts and actions by whispering into their ear. It was a temporary but powerful means of avoiding confrontation.

"There. It looks like we have some time to chat, Miss Tierra."

Alice, now free to stay in the drawing-room, held her dress above her feet and took confident steps straight toward Tierra.

"I overheard certain falsehoods that you shared about me, so please allow me to make some corrections. When I first met Miss Tierra the other day..."

I—Alice—began to speak. The room, which was styled entirely in rococo furniture, fell to a hush all at once.

"She was the one who reached out to me for a handshake. When I complied, Miss Tierra cried out loudly, as if to accuse me of squeezing her hand intentionally."

"Well, it was very painful, so I couldn't help but scream. Are you implying I should be silent, even in the face of such horrid treatment? How cruel of you..."

Tierra sniffled as she spoke, removing a handkerchief from within her dress and dabbing at her eyes, although I couldn't see any actual tears.

"Miss Liddell, I'm certain you're in love with Lord Knightley. That's why you resent me for my engagement to him and sent me those death threats!"

She pointed to the floor, where dozens of the same message I'd received were scattered all about. The text of each letter was exactly the same, and my guess was that she'd wanted to skimp on the printing bill.

If she'd just printed my name, I wouldn't have the upper hand in this situation.

I held out my left hand. Leeds placed one of the letters from the floor into my palm.

"Now this is certainly funny. I received the exact same threat that you did, but mine is covered in red ink to look like blood."

I removed the letter from my bag and held it up with my other hand.

Tierra's charming face twitched involuntarily when she saw them together.

"Printing presses are so convenient, being able to mass-produce letters identical in appearance and text like this.

However... Miss Tierra, yours are in much better condition than mine. It's almost as if you've kept them hidden away in a drawer until today, waiting for the chance to show them off."

"That's not true!"

I was clearly on the right track. Tierra snatched her letter out of my hand and stamped down on it with her foot.

"Mine were dirty too! Just take a look for yourself!"

"All I can see are the scuff marks you just created..."

"Are you blind?! Look closer!"

She dropped to the floor, scooped up more of the letters, and threw them right at my face.

"Miss Liddell, that's enough excuses out of you. I know you're jealous of Lord Knightley's love for me, but this is taking it too far!"

"And how exactly does Lord Knightley love you?"

"He listens intently to each and every word I say, and he even grabs hold of me when he sees me stumble!"

"That's it?"

I couldn't hold back a chuckle upon hearing her reasoning. Tierra didn't seem to understand why I was laughing at her, but as the other girls in the room began to speak up, I watched her face turn pale.

"Um... When I met His Lordship, he seemed like the kind of man to listen intently to anyone, no matter the topic..."

"Indeed. I once wounded my foot due to a broken heel, and Lord Knightley brought out a chair for me to sit in. He even arranged for me to see a doctor, and my father was so grateful."

"The earl is famous for his kindness and chivalry. Even I remember when—"

One by one, the girls revealed similar experiences. Dark treated everyone with compassion, so there was no lack of stories. I listened to them exchange their anecdotes and looked at Tierra with pity.

"It sounds like all the ladies here have been treated kindly by Lord Knightley. Miss Tierra, is it possible you misinterpreted his compassion as romantic feelings for you? Is that why you decided to refer to yourself as his fiancée?"

"Of course not! My father told me he would arrange for our engagement!"

"So, it hasn't happened yet? Lord Knightley never agreed, but your father still let the papers run the story. Aristocrats aren't

supposed to be responsible for these kinds of scandals..."

"It's not a scandal! I'm his fiancée!"

My words seemed to set her off. Tierra closed her fan and squeezed it until her knuckles went white.

"I'm cuter than any of the girls in this room! If he has to marry someone, he's better off with a cute commoner than some ugly noblewoman!"

The girls in the room had been calm until that moment.

What a fool...

These were women of high enough status that a life peer couldn't touch them. Upon this revelation of Tierra's feelings of superiority, they would not sit quietly and take it from her.

"Miss Tierra, you're quite confident in your looks, but you don't appear very savvy when it comes to picking your fights. I'll make you an offer: if you admit to your mistakes, including sending me the death threat and looking down on these noblewomen, I'm willing to put all of this behind us."

"You really think you're in charge, don't you?! I know that you lived as an orphan on the streets after your family was killed. Who'd want to take orders from such a disgusting girl like you?!"

"Disgusting? Did you just say I'm disgusting? ...Hehehe."

I broke into a smile. Joy was welling up in me from the pit of my stomach. I couldn't see my own face, but I'm sure it must have been twisted into its most evil grin yet.

Tierra trembled like she'd seen the devil when she looked at me.

"M-My father is the chief of police. He can make anything happen, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

She clearly had no intention of backing off. With no other choice left, I turned toward the door.

"I see. Could you please step inside now?"

The door creaked open once more at my request.

Standing there in the hall was Dark, wearing a navy-blue cloak.

"Good day, my fair ladies. Pardon my intrusion."

The young women cried out in excitement upon seeing their beloved earl, but Tierra just stood there, the blood draining from her face.

"Lord Knightley, why are you..."

"I'd be happy to explain, so please have a seat, Miss Tierra."

Lord Knightley is on his way to meet with a judge. He's going to report your father."

"Report him...?"

Dark lifted his hat and bowed toward the perplexed Tierra.

"I've been looking into the monetary rewards being distributed as bounties, you see. Your father, the chief of police, has been swindling a portion of these funds away from their rightful recipients. I've been visiting the police station over and over to dig up proof of his crimes."

He reached under his cloak and retrieved a bundle of documents, then spread them out before us like a paper fan.

There were copies of sales slips, receipts under the chief's name, and documents that outlined the bounties. Together, they were clear proof of embezzlement.

"He was quite flagrant in his actions—be it accepting bribes or manipulating the media. I had the help of an officer who was forced to participate in this whole scheme, so it was easy to gather the evidence."

"You can show me whatever you want...but I don't believe my father was embezzling money. Why were you looking into it in the first place?"

"Why? You really don't know?"

Dark's direct response caused Tierra to freeze. It was clear she never expected the target of her manipulation to call *her* out for being ignorant.

"The money for these bounties comes from us nobles, and I personally take on the duty of writing up the reports about them. I record who receives the money and in what amounts."

Because of this role of Dark's, the other aristocrats knew about the compensation the Liddell family received for solving crimes. We had never once been banned from collecting bounties, which meant they probably didn't have a clue about the methods we used in our work.

"It would be a disgrace to all noblemen if your father purchased his peerage with embezzled funds, so I decided to look into it myself. Unfortunately, my suspicions proved correct."

"I...didn't know about any of this..."

Tierra wore a confused look on her face, but it was still a bad excuse. Any girl born to a family of nobility, no matter how high in rank, is taught to be well versed in manners, letter writing, and

even instructing the servants. It's necessary to memorize the family tree as well. Work and relationship updates are shared frequently, and if you don't memorize these hierarchies, it's all too easy to end up insulting someone.

But Tierra seemed like she didn't have a clue about the moral imperative nobles had to be good and do good. I suspected she had been much more focused on living a life of luxury.

"Miss Tierra, we aristocrats face many more struggles than you seem to be imagining. We're the ones responsible for protecting the people's way of life, but there's no one in charge of protecting ours. Our authority is necessary to prevent senseless attempts at power grabs. Miss Tierra, you understand how that could lead to endless wars, yes?"

I explained slowly, as if I were describing the situation to the Tweedles.

"We must live and behave in ways that honor our titles so that the people believe we are worthy of them. But it's no easy burden to bear. We take on debts for the sake of our territory, sometimes even to the point of our families going bankrupt."

"A noble's title may seem like a shield," Dark said, "but in fact, it is a cage. Therefore, it's an unspoken agreement that we must not act in ways that violate the trust of the common man. Do you understand now?" He smiled at Tierra, whose eyes were starting to look glassy.

Oh, she's about to cry.

Tierra indeed began to shed tears right then and there.

"It's possible my father did the bad things you said he did...but does that mean even I deserve to be punished for being his daughter? I only had those threats printed to secure my own future. I just desperately wanted to find my happiness! Don't you all know what that feels like?!"

"....."

The girls didn't look at Tierra, even as she addressed them. It was like she had ceased to exist.

Tierra exploded, shattering the mask she'd worn before us once and for all.

"Why won't you look at me?! You may have rich parents, but your hearts are cold as ice! If I lose everything and have to live on the streets, it'll be your fault!"

"I have a feeling it won't come to that."

Dark and I exchanged glances. He handed me one of *those* magazines.

I didn't even want to touch the foul thing, but I couldn't show her so much as a moment of hesitation.

"After all, you're a very talented model, Miss Tierra!"

With a deep breath, I held open the magazine, and a wave of shrieks rippled through the room. The girls here had very sheltered upbringings, so I could excuse their exaggerated reactions.

Of course they're disgusted. But girls this age are also very curious creatures.

Just as I'd hoped, the girls quieted down and began to peer at the magazine from behind their hands. They examined the model closely and saw her strong resemblance to Tierra.

"That face... Miss Tierra, is this you?"

"O-Of course not. Look at her name. That's not me!"

"But..."

Dark approached the bewildered girls and began to explain. "I did a bit of investigating and found that 'Marianne' is the pseudonym of one Miss Lockholmes," he said it bluntly for all to hear.

Dark whisked the magazine from my grasp, to my relief. I was itching to wash away the feeling of holding that magazine in my hands.

Like bees to a hive, the girls surrounded Tierra and berated her.

"So the daughter of the chief of police is posing for illegal magazines. Just what are the police doing over there?"

"They're probably all bought off, if even the chief is involved in embezzlement."

"I need to warn Father. I wouldn't want him dirtying our family name by associating with any kind of criminal."

Tierra just stood there, taking all the scornful looks and words of criticism.

"...My father was accepted by his fellow noblemen after he purchased his peerage, but I needed money to be accepted by the ladies my age. They'd just look down on me if I didn't wear expensive dresses and accessories, right? That's why I had to model for these magazines..."

She approached Dark and stared up at him with her signature puppy-dog eyes.

"I took the modeling work and sent Miss Liddell the death threat all because of my love for you, my lord. Don't you understand...?"

Her voice was dripping with honey. I imagined it was enough to hook just about any man, but still, Dark took a step away from her and smiled calmly.

"I'm sorry, but no, I don't understand."

"Wh-Why not...?"

"Because a person's innocence is a million times more valuable than any fancy dress or accessory. I know of a woman who lived in poverty in the East End, but even then, she never sullied her noble status. What I think is more beautiful than anything is to live with a sincere heart—just like her."

He turned toward me with a gentle smile. I felt a tender ache well up in my chest.

Tierra, now rejected by Dark, bit her lip and glared at me.

"Like I said, nobles must be trustworthy in all actions. As an earl, I can't associate with a woman who models for an illegal magazine..."

"And how the hell are you trustworthy?!"

Tierra struck Dark across the face with her fan.

"You think you can talk to me like that, even with your past?! I know all about it. You're the last man these women should be adoring...!"

Dark's face, still turned to one side in response to the slap, went cold. The kindness in his mouth and eyes was gone. I could sense a merciless rage within him, like a sharp icicle ready to fall, or the breeze of the ocean from beneath a cliff. I'd never seen anything like it before.

"Miss Tierra, this is bad!"

Just then, a chubby police officer ran into the room holding a newspaper.

"The paper says the chief was embezzling money. The station's swarmed with journalists!"

"How do the newspapers already know?! Lord Knightley said he hadn't seen the judge—"

It was then that Tierra noticed me chuckling to myself.

"What the hell have you done, Alice Liddell?!"

"Nothing at all. Perhaps they heard Dark and me discussing his crimes when we were visiting their office?"

One day earlier, Dark and I had gone to the newspaper office together.

We were there to confront the writers about the false information that Dark and Tierra were engaged. The president of the company even came out to make a personal apology.

We then discussed our intent to report the chief's embezzling, and the article was already as good as written by that point.

"We didn't breathe a word of your illegal modeling. If you decide to live righteously starting today, I believe a quiet, happy life will still be within your reach."

"I don't want a quiet life!"

Tierra yanked the officer's blade out of its sheath and dashed straight toward me. Luckily enough, she was a slow fighter, and I was able to dodge her just by turning to the side. The sharp tip of the sword pierced the air where I had stood.

The other women screamed and nearly trampled each other trying to get out of the room.

"All of this is your fault!"

She swung the blade at my face, but I didn't need to dodge it this time, as the weapon had been caught and wrapped in a metal chain.

"If you lay a finger on Miss Alice, I'll tear your pretty little face to bits. Got it?"

It was Leeds who was blocking her attack. He'd used the chain belt around his waist as a rope to rip the blade from her hands. Finally defeated, Tierra sank to the floor.

"I sure hope that's the last of all this fuss..."

I let out a deep sigh and hung my head, only to notice that the shadows around my legs were darker than usual.

As I tried to figure out what was going on, I watched the shadows take the form of a rose crest on the ground.

Oh no! The rose stigma?!

The same mark as the one on Leeds's tongue and Jack's hands was now growing around me and spreading toward Tierra. The dark, glistening crest started to make its way around her body.

Her face went pale as she began to sink into the ground, little by little, like she was caught in quicksand.

"Help me! I swear I'll never do it again, so please forgive me!"

Tierra wailed as she was swallowed all the way up to her head. Once she was no longer visible, the stigma shrunk smaller and

smaller until it was gone.

The floor and furniture hadn't changed an inch, but Tierra alone had vanished from the room.

I stood there, dumbfounded, when Leeds let out a whistle of admiration.

"Wowie, I've never seen your stigma before, my lady. Who knew it packed such a punch?"

"Y-Yes. I hide it because it's very powerful..."

That was all I could say.

Dark's gaze from across the room stung my skin.

Please don't notice...

I closed my eyes and prayed. It was my most important secret. No one could ever find out.

Later on, I would learn that Tierra had been teleported to the river Thames.

A passing ferry managed to save her before she drowned, but Tierra never regained consciousness and became known as the next Sleeping Beauty.

As many times as I'd played *Evil Alice's Lover* in my past life, this was a development that was brand-new to me.

Chapter 5: Memories of Rabbit and Alice's Secret

“**IT’S** dark, Alice, so don’t lose sight of us.”

“It’s dark, Alice, so try not to stumble.”

Dum, Dee, and I maneuvered our way through the moonlit streets of London. The three of us were dressed in black coats to blend in with the darkness on our way to the National Archives building.

There, we would search for clues about this secret of Dark’s that Tierra revealed to us.

If a nobleman were to be questioned about an unsavory past, there should be some kind of official record that remained as a result.

The archives were closed, and on top of that, documents regarding private hearings weren’t available to the public. For those reasons, we chose to sneak in under the cloak of night.

We might be pushing our luck, but I could end up falling for Dark if I don’t do this.

Ever since the incident with Tierra, I felt a tender tug at my heartstrings each time I thought of Dark. He wasn’t just aware of the time I spent living in the East End, but he even respected me for it, and that fact alone made me far too happy for my own good.

Looking back on it, on the night of the ball, Dark was only capable of observing my locked heart from the outside. But now it would be easy enough for him to gain complete access...

...because I was unlocking it from the inside.

If he truly managed to steal my heart...

I’d be dead in no time at all.

Danger is more likely to befall the heroine in this game as she gets closer and closer to her love interest. If I was living in Dark’s route, I couldn’t pursue him romantically.

I needed to look for a side character to marry who posed no threat to my life, unlike Dark. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure it was my best shot at cheating death. And yet...

...deep down, he was the only one I wanted to be with.

What girl wouldn't be flustered to find herself in this situation?

I just wanted a reason to get over him already. If there was proof that he was a horrible man, I could probably overcome these feelings for him.

With the proximity to the river Thames and the dusting of nighttime mist on the streets, the air became damp and pungent the closer we got to the archives. We hid behind a tree near the back gate to survey the area, where we saw guards patrolling the perimeter of the darkened stone building.

Breaking into this building would be no easy task for a human. But luckily...

The three of us were stigmata—demon children. We sat down under the tree and held hands to form a circle.

“Are you ready, Alice?” “Are you ready, Alice?”

The matching moles under their eyes turned into droplets of liquid. Like black ink, they dribbled down their cheeks and expanded, forming the rose-shaped stigma on their faces like tattoos.

Warmth crept into my hands like static electricity from their fingertips. I felt my bangs lift up in the breeze as warm air rose past my head. It turned denser and denser, then split apart loudly.



CRACK!

A shockwave rippled through me. Looking down, my hands, my coat, my boots—they had all gone transparent. As if I were peering through polished glass, I could see the lawn beneath me without any obstruction.

I turned my arms over. The glow of the streetlamps was pouring through my hands.

“I’ll never get used to this...”

I was witnessing the power of “Hide and Seek,” the Tweedle brothers’ stigma.

It allowed the users and anyone holding their hands to turn invisible but didn’t offer any means of attack.

“I wonder why you two ended up with this power,” I said aloud.

Jack’s flames were the embodiment of his hatred for the person who tore apart the Liddell family. Leeds’s Liar’s Tongue came from his life before his rebirth, where he experienced many hardships.

A stigmata’s power originated from the thoughts and emotions they felt when they perished.

“We didn’t want to be found, Alice,” they chimed in unison.

Dum and Dee began to speak about their past as duelists.

Twins were such an unusual phenomenon in the fighting world that the two were allowed to compete as a pair. They became the ultimate duo, but when greedy higher-ups caught wind of them, they were ordered to face each other as opponents.

Neither boy was capable of hurting the other. But they would be killed if they didn’t obey...

In the end, they decided to flee on the eve of the duel.

“They sent people to find us.”

“We curled up real small to hide in the sewers.”

“But it was pitch-black...”

“And so cold, we couldn’t breathe anymore.”

The boys held each other as they drifted away, and in their final moments, they shared the same thought: *If no one could see us in the first place, we wouldn’t have had to come here.*

The passing demon fancied that idea. The twins were each given a stigma on their cheeks and awakened from their eternal sleep.

“...I’m sorry for making you relive all that.”

I cast my eyes to the ground, having glimpsed the pain they went through. Dum and Dee stared up at me with wide eyes. They approached me, and each nudged their cheeks against mine.

“Don’t grieve for us, Alice.”

“It’s all part of how we came to meet you.”

“Yes... That’s right.”

Dum and Dee appreciated their tragedy in the end, since it served as the reason our paths crossed. But I didn’t feel the same way. I couldn’t accept that tragedy was ever a necessary prelude to happiness.

How pathetic of me...

A gust of wind blew through us, and the clouds shifted in the sky until they were covering the moon.

“Stand up, Alice.”

“The night’s on our side now.”

The twins led me toward the gate by my hands.

We waited for the moment when the guards switched positions, and then we passed through the back gates. The guards, both with bayonets strapped to their shoulders, turned around as if they sensed something. But try as they might, they wouldn’t be able to spot us, and they’d assume we were nothing more than a passing breeze.

The three of us arrived at the rear entrance, which was sealed shut with a large lock. It was clear we would be unable to enter without the proper key or the necessary force to break the lock. But thankfully for us, I had a trick up my sleeve.

When you examine this lock in the game, it gives you the choice to wrap around to the side of the building.

I led the twins into a side road behind the building.

The stone walls of the archives were old but sturdy. Unlike Japanese buildings, which were made to be rebuilt within a short span of time, this one didn’t have a single spot we could exploit to enter.

I scanned the walls with my eyes until I spotted a window with what appeared to be a warped frame.

The stone used in the construction of these buildings was barely affected by rain and wind, but the same could not be said for the wooden window frames. They absorbed moisture from rain and bloated up, then dried out again under the sunlight.

The foggy town of London was prone to constant changes in weather. Rainy days would be interrupted by periods of sunshine, followed by more rain, only to repeat again over and over. This weather pattern caused wood to shrink down, warping its shape within the buildings.

I couldn't see a lock on the window, so I let go of the twins' hands. The stigma's power left me and I was visible once more. I had to hurry, or I'd be spotted by any guard that approached us.

I removed a wire from my small bag, looped the tip, and fed it into a gap in the window frame. I lowered the wire down into the room until it caught on the weight that held the window shut. These types of windows would open when the weight was pulled up.

One, two, three!

I tugged on the wire with all my might. The window slowly began to open in front of me.

Suddenly, I noticed an orange glow coming from the back gate. The light hit the surrounding trees and spread in all directions, wavering as it crept toward us. A guard was coming our way on patrol.

I held the wire in position and called out behind me.

"Dum, Dee. You first," I whispered sharply.

The pair leaped in through the open window as instructed. Their past as duelists seemed to make them strong jumpers. They crouched on top of the window frame and reached their hands out to me.

"Come in, Alice." "Come in, Alice."

"Right."

As they pulled me inside, I realized the ribbon around my waist was hanging out the window, so I quickly tugged it back. I then closed the window as quietly as possible and held my breath, putting my back against the wall. The light outside passed by us and disappeared in the direction of the front gate.

"I don't think anyone spotted us..."

I lit a nearby candlestick with one of my matches. The room we were in was large enough to host a banquet party, and the walls were lined with tall shelves.

They were all stuffed with books. I found the lower drawers filled with stacks of documents when I opened them too. The papers stated they were reports about completed inquiries, and each one

bore the signature of the presiding head of the hearing.

This is it!

We had snuck into the exact reference room we were looking for. I struck a victory pose in my imagination.

During the events of the game, Alice visits the same National Archives when she finds herself stumped by a case. It's a location that provides a strangely coincidental piece of information that leads to solving the case in the end.

If my life was still operating under the system of *Evil Alice's Lover*, I was certain this place would have important information for me...!

The twins cocked their heads at my triumphant expression.

"What are you investigating, Alice?"

"What should we be looking for, Alice?"

"I want information on Earl Knightley. Bring me everything you can find about him from the last twenty-three years."

"Got it!" "Got it!"

They saluted me before scattering to different sides of the room. Soon afterward, they returned with their arms stuffed full of documents.

I leaned against the shelf and flipped through the paper under the light of the candle.

"1885...1884...1883... Here it is..."

Under the row of *K* names, listed on a paper from five years earlier, was the name "Lord Knightley."

These four objections have been presented in opposition to the inheritance of the Knightley earldom.

The paper stated that after Dark's predecessor passed away, many of his relatives sought to claim the title of earl. This was something possible within the world of the game where titles could be revoked under special circumstances.

"That must have been hard on him... Oh?"

I frowned when I spotted the fourth objection.

Just like the others, it was an objection to Dark's inheritance of his title. But this one presented an understandable reason for why the Knightley family should be stripped of their entire peerage.

The late Lord Knightley was a known devil worshipper. His eldest son, Dark, was said to be born from his mother after they achieved communication with a demon. To this day, the son shuts himself away in the castle, never to show his face among society. He is not a suitable

heir for the title—

“Dark? He used to be a shut-in?”

It was hard for me to believe. Dark always had such a flamboyant personality and loved to stand out from the crowd. How could someone like that be a shut-in? Though, that wasn’t the problem the document was underlining...

“Maybe Dark understands stigmata because his father was a devil worshipper?”

But there was no truth to him being conceived by summoning a demon. If he had been, Dark would definitely look much more frightening than he did.

“Ah! Alice! Look out!” came overlapping cries from behind me.

I was reaching toward the next stack of documents when I found myself suddenly covered in a rain of paper from above.

The twins had tipped over an open drawer.

I popped my head out of the papers that now buried me.

“You gave me such a fright...! Be careful, you two.”

“Yes, ma’am!” “Yes, ma’am!”

They stood up and dashed off behind the bookshelves.

Now alone, I started to pick up the papers that were scattered about. Then my eyes stopped on an old document.

Regarding Bernard Sting’s adoption into the Liddell family—

“This is about Uncle Bear...!”

Bear was the younger brother of Alice’s father. His permanent residence was in Italy, but he traveled from country to country, buying and selling rare furniture and wares. He was a trader by profession.

During the events of the tragedy three years prior, we heard that Bear was on an island to the south, purchasing clothes from the native people there, and he rushed back to London as soon as he learned of the murders. When “Alice” was never identified among the bodies, he continued to search, believing me to still be alive. Eventually he would also help me restore the status of the Liddell family.

Bear was a famous philanthropist and managed multiple orphanages as well. His role was not just in name only—Bear would even walk through London and personally offer kids shelter from their life on the streets. He was a truly kindhearted man.

Bear was also the one who found the twins wandering the

streets after their rebirths and introduced me to them.

“So Uncle Bear was adopted...”

He was taken into the family sixteen years earlier, right after my birth.

I was a bit saddened to learn that Bear and I weren’t actually blood relatives...

But it doesn’t matter that he was adopted. Bear is still family. He’s my dear uncle!

We spent some more time sifting through all the documents but were unable to find anything else relating to the Knightley family.

Once I finished returning the records to their shelves, the three of us cloaked ourselves with the twins’ stigma and left the archives. We tiptoed quietly down the hallways and out to the street where we found a carriage to board.

The carriage rattled loudly as we took off. I gazed out through the window at all the night-colored sights. Unlike in my past life, not every building and street was lit up by electricity this late in the evening.

The carriage wasn’t lit either. My body was entirely blacked out by the night.

Perhaps it was my identity as “Alice” that gave me comfort in times like these. I enjoyed the feeling of my skin sinking into the darkness as if it were no longer a part of this world at all. It felt just like falling asleep in a pitch-black room.

From across the river, Big Ben displayed a time nearing midnight.

As the twins dozed off to sleep, their heads in my lap, a random thought entered my mind.

I wonder where Jack and Dark met.

I had no memories of any real “guests” visiting the Liddell estate while my father was alive. Bear and other relatives who knew of the house’s traps would sometimes come to check in, but that was it. If the former Lord Knightley and his son had visited us, I would have surely been officially introduced to them, but I couldn’t remember any kind of big event like that.

Jack was the son of a long line of workers who served the Liddells, so even though he accompanied Father on shopping trips from time to time, there would’ve been no need to take him to the

Knightleys' London residence.

It would have to remain a mystery until Jack was able to recall the details.

But still, I can't believe that Dark was...

Though I was surprised, I didn't think any less of Dark for being a shut-in. Everyone lives different lives under different circumstances, after all. It's no shock that some would want to just completely close themselves off to the world from time to time.

Why, even I could have been called a shut-in at one point in my life.

As a child, I spent most of my time alone, playing with dolls. There was the occasional chat with Jack or game of hide-and-seek with the maids, but I still spent many days inside our house.

Although, for the span of one summer, I did have an actual "friend."

He was a young boy whose family asked us to take him in temporarily. We didn't speak to each other at first, since the boy was so painfully shy that he would always cover himself in his bedsheets to hide.

He never told me his real name, so I called him Rabbit.

"But that definitely wasn't Dark..."

I was certain of this fact. As far as I could tell, the boy didn't resemble Dark whatsoever.

"Wherever he is today, I hope he's happy..."

I whispered that brief prayer for my friend. Suddenly, the carriage jolted and screeched to a halt.

The twins shot up and peered through the window, rubbing their eyes.

"What was that?" "What was that?"

"I don't know. We just stopped all of a sudden."

I looked out and saw a cluster of black shadows surrounding the carriage. They wavered like smoke and stretched their arms out, severing the reins between the driver and his horses.

The horses bolted away from us. The driver let out a scream and fled from his seat.

"What are those things...?"

"This is bad!"

"We need to hide!"

The twins pushed me down into the seat and shoved the carriage doors open without a moment of hesitation.

Dum shot out of the carriage, whisked two daggers out of his inner coat pocket, and lunged toward the shadows. Dee removed and unfolded the small crossbow that had been strapped to his suspenders, then took aim and fired at the foes from the cab.

But the shadows only wavered in place, as unaffected as the wind.

Dum's blade whisked through the shadows. Dee's arrows floated above them.

"Take that!"

Dum was impatient. He swung his dagger down hard, and the shadow suddenly vanished, then reappeared around one of the roadside trees.

His blade now buried in the tree, Dum anchored his feet and pulled as hard as he could, but the dagger was still stuck deep inside the trunk. The other shadows began reaching out for him, their hands twisting into the shape of knives. I pushed Dee out of the way so I could leave the carriage.

"That's enough!"

I aimed my pistol and pulled the trigger. The unharmed shadows turned away from Dum to face me. I couldn't make out any eyes in their dark figures, but I could still tell they were out for blood.

"If you're here for a fight, then I'll entertain you, so step away from Dum this instant. Dee, go help him."

"But, Alice..."

"Now!" I barked.

Dee ran off toward Dum as I commanded. In return, the shadows began to creep in my direction. They gathered to form a single, swirling cluster. It looked like a black wave was bearing down on me.

"All right, you've certainly got my attention. What do you want with me?"

I pretended to be calm and surveyed the shadows surrounding me.

There was no response. They just continued to sway like the rippling summer air.

"I see... If you have nothing to say, I'm afraid I'll have to send you on your way!"

I fired my gun wildly in each direction, but the shadows didn't appear to take any damage. I was out of ammo all too soon, and the

wall of shadows began to close in around me.

What do I do?!

“Stay away from Alice!” “Stay away from Alice!”

Dum and Dee had retrieved the dagger from the tree. They plunged through the shadows and stood on either side of me. The shadows in front sent their pointed fingertips straight at Dee, and without a second to hesitate, I pulled the two boys into my embrace.

“Please, no!”

I felt the night breeze blow through me as they attacked.

“Ngh!”

The impact ran down my body, sending heat rippling through my arm. I could feel blood pouring out of my skin. I desperately bore the pain so as only to keep the gun in my grip. Without it, I’d have no way of protecting the twins.

I was mustering up the strength to point the weapon up at the shadows when I noticed something strange.

The shadows weren’t wavering anymore. They looked like the surface of a calm lake undisturbed by wind.

What on earth?

I stood in confusion, and at that moment, a torrent of water poured down on the shadows from above.

“How is everyone doing tonight?”

With a greeting like something a performer would ask his audience at a concert, a man descended from above, clad in a crisp white suit. It was none other than Hisui. The crescent moon of his stigma was visible on the side of his stomach, and he held large bubbles of water in each hand.

The twins lit up as soon as they saw him.

“Hisui!” “Hisui!”

“Sorry I am late.”

With a smile, Hisui put his hands together and plunged them forward. The bubbles shot out a powerful waterfall that blasted the shadows away. I stood up with the twins.

“It doesn’t look like we can eliminate them for good.”

Hisui then held out his hand toward me like a child asking for candy.

“Please, fire.”

“Fire?”

I removed the matchbox from my bag.

“Will this do?”

Hisui slid out and lit a single match from the box. When he connected the orange flame with the bubbles in his hands, the water bloomed into a white-hot fire.

“The water’s burning?”

“Me-ta-nol. His Lordship taught me this.”

“Oh, it’s methanol?”

Methanol is a type of alcohol that’s poisonous to humans but serves a useful role in sanitation and as fuel for alcohol lamps. It appeared Hisui’s stigma allowed him to produce all kinds of liquids.

He covered the flaming orb with a veil of water, quickly split it into four quarters, and sent them in each direction around us. They shone brightly like large lanterns.

The shadows dissolved into the ground like melting ice when the beams of light hit them.

“Shadow cannot beat light. It is my victory.”

Their remnants crawled like bugs on the ground. Together, they were forming the shape of a human with the ears of an animal.

“What are they?”

“Minor demons. They are faint like shadows.”

“I didn’t know demons could have animal ears.”

“Not ears. They are demon horns. Greater demons can hide them.”

“Horns...”

A memory from my childhood suddenly flooded into my mind.

It was about my friend, the boy who was deathly shy. I never told him this, but I knew what he was hiding under the sheets he always wore.

My friend had two long lumps sprouting from his head. I could see the shadow they cast on the floor even when he was hiding them. That’s why I called him Rabbit.

I always thought those lumps looked like a rabbit’s ears. But I was wrong.

He wasn’t hiding ears—they were demon horns.

“Rabbit was a demon...”

Hisui tore off a piece of his shirt and wrapped it around my wound to stop the bleeding.

“Alice, can you bear the pain?”

“Alice, is there anything we can do?”

“I’m fine. It’s not a deep cut.” I tried my best to soothe the

twins' fears.

Hisui stared at the remnants of the shadows around us and spoke.

"His Lordship ordered me to keep you safe as mouses, so I will escort you home."

"Thank you. I appreciate it... By the way, did you mean to use the idiom 'safe as houses?' Your English has really been improving lately; even I struggle with idioms sometimes."

"Thank you. I will remember that next time."

It was a relief to know the shadows couldn't attack us as long as we had Hisui's flames.

If Dark sent Mr. Hisui out to find us, he must have predicted that we would be sneaking into the archives tonight.

Just when I finally thought we were one step ahead of him too. I clutched my throbbing arm and sighed quietly to myself.



AFTER escorting us back to the Liddell estate, Hisui stood in front of the entryway taking deep breaths.

"In, out. In, out. I am okay now. That was hard work."

He reached out and pulled the twins into a big hug. With one eye on them, I used the other to survey our surroundings.

The minor demons didn't follow us home. But I was still worried that the dark spots underneath the trees or the shadows cast by the gates would spring to life at any moment.

"Hisui?"

"Are you going home now?"

Hisui let go of the scared twins and nodded. He turned to me and held out one of his floating water lanterns.

"Take this. Demons chase you."

"Chase me...?"

"But you are safe here. Something strong is here."

"Strong? What do you mean?"

I cocked my head at Hisui and he brought his index finger up to his lips.

"It is a secret. His Lordship says I cannot tell."

"Very well. I'll find a way to get it out of Dark later. Thank you for your help tonight, Mr. Hisui. Please be safe on your way home."

“Farewell.”

He waved back at me. We watched as he and the remaining three flame orbs disappeared into the distance.

Somehow, I felt as if the darkness embodying him was snickering at me.

Jack scolded me as he tended to my wound, then sent me off to bed.

The water lantern still burned brightly as it sat on my bedside table.

I was safe as long as I had those flames. I knew that, yet I couldn't help but glance underneath my desk and behind the damask curtains on the wall. Did my lamp always cast such dark shadows off my parasol? The fear only made the ache in my arm worse.

My life was never one without danger, but ever since I met Lord Knightley—since I met Dark, it was one terrifying experience after another.

Before Dark came into her life, “Alice” never wavered in her calm demeanor. Be it falling into a pond or opening a package full of snakes, there was almost nothing that I couldn't shrug off as a necessary part of my life.

I did have emotions, but I never felt as though I experienced them as strongly as others. Neither grief nor joy affected me much at all.

Maybe I grew up that way to become a proper otome game heroine.

I'm merely a vessel for the player to project their emotions onto. Not even I can change my own life—that role belongs to the player alone. But that all changed after I met Dark.

It's actually a relief to reach twists in the story I've never seen before. It makes me feel like I'm not being controlled by some other person, for better or worse.

The Tweedles were curled up at the foot of my bed, sleeping away like a pair of cats. If I retired from my father's business, I wouldn't be able to work with them anymore.

“Marrying a side character and living a long life... Is that really my only path to happiness...?”

I took in the sound of their gentle breaths and waited for morning to arrive. Just as sunlight started to pour through the

window, I heard a knock on my door.

Jack entered the room holding a silver tray.

Leeds was behind him, his face visibly pale. He had been out on personal business until the morning, and I assumed he heard about the injury when he returned.

The two filed into the room and rushed to my bedside.

"How's your wound, my lady?"

"It's just a small cut on my arm," I answered.

I slowly sat up in bed. My mind was foggy from staying up all night to keep a watchful eye on things. Leeds took one look at my bandages and his whole face fell.

"It looks so painful," he said, almost in tears.

"It's not that bad. Jack wrapped it up a lot more than it needed."

Leeds reached out and covered my mouth to keep me from downplaying the pain. He sat on the edge of my bed.

"I just knew I should have gone with you. How could I be out of the house when you needed my help? I'm such a fool..."

"Don't be so upset, Leeds. It will heal in no time. There might be a bit of scarring, though."

"I'm fine with that."

"What do you mean?"

Leeds placed his hands on both of my cheeks.

"If you're left with a scar, then I'll take you as my bride. I don't give a hoot if you dress in rags, or if you can't speak anymore, or if you're covered in scars from head to toe. You're still perfect to me. Even if all that was left of you was your head, why, I'd still kiss you every single day!"

"Leave Miss Alice out of your disgusting fantasies!"

Jack smacked Leeds on the forehead and placed the tray on my lap. It was carrying a delicious-looking breakfast—buttered toast and a creamy soup filled with carrots and celery, still steaming.

"Eat something. You need your strength to heal."

"Thank you, Jack."

In between bites of toast, I informed them all about the events of the previous day. Leeds sat in a chair by my bedside, sipping his cup of coffee and stroking the twins' hair.

"Sounds like these two did very well. I'm so proud of them."

The boys let out cute little mumbling sounds in their sleep.

"And Hisui told you the shadows were demons?"

“Yes. It appears that minor demons take the form of shadows because they’re not powerful enough to hold a shape.”

“But why are demons after you?”

“I can think of one reason...”

The idea in my head was a common trope for DLC content. New characters always end up connected to the center of the story. The big picture had to involve these new versions of Lord Knightley, the Sleeping Beauties, and the shadow demons—the details that were unlike what I remembered from the original game. That was the angle I needed to view it from.

“With us investigating the Sleeping Beauty cases right now, I believe the shadow demons could be trying to prevent us from finding the perpetrator by targeting me.”

We only broke into the National Archives to find information on Lord Knightley, but from the outside, it could have looked like we were there to investigate the other cases.

“So you think the culprit is a demon?”

“Probably more like a human who has some kind of connection to demons.”

“A demon connection...”

Leeds seemed skeptical of my theory, but Jack’s face lit up.

“That means a stigmata might be behind it!”

“Considering the nature of the cases, I think that’s highly likely. We must find out if there are any stigmata in London who can control minor demons.”

I snuck glances at them when I finished speaking. Neither boy seemed to notice the fear I was feeling. The conclusion I’d reached after a night of staring into the darkness terrified me.

What if the culprit was none other than Rabbit? Would I have the strength to carry out punishment against my one and only friend?

Whoever it is, they must face my judgment. I am “Alice,” after all...

Trying to convince myself of my resolve, I finished my breakfast and set the spoon on the tray.

“Let’s limit our operations to daytime from now on. I’d like the Tweedles to rest up as well. Could you two take on the investigation for today?”

“Oh, of course. But are you sure we shouldn’t stay with you? If more demons come to attack...” Leeds’s words trailed off.

"I'll be fine. Mr. Hisui told me we wouldn't see any demons as long as we were here at home. It'll be more dangerous for you two, so please be back before dark."

"We will. And I'll be expecting a big hug for my hard work when I return."

Leeds stood up with a wink and silently exited the room. Jack followed behind him with his sword in hand.

"We'll be back. Leave the dishes in the hall for me."

"Wait, Jack," I said quietly.

He turned around slowly at the sound of my voice.

"What?"

"There's something I want to ask you, but it's not related to the Sleeping Beauties. Remember how you told me you'd met Dark before? What about his father, the former Lord Knightley?"

It wouldn't be strange for a devil worshipper to have some kind of tie to the Liddell family. Jack nodded, and it appeared my theory was correct.

"I remember him. I saw him with your father in the drawing-room of a nobleman's estate. He was quite the skinny bloke, and his face was as pale as a corpse."

"What? I remember a man like that..."

But I didn't meet him in anyone's drawing-room.

The previous earl had once arrived at our mansion at the crack of dawn. He was there to deliver a young boy who wore a bed sheet wrapped around his body.

"Maybe he was..."

Rabbit was not a character I had ever encountered in the game during my previous life. It was foolish of me to only now be realizing what that meant.

Rabbit is another new character they added to the game!

"Why didn't I notice before...?!"

Seeing me drape my hand across my forehead in shock, Jack cocked his head in confusion.

"Did you figure out who the culprit is?"

"No, but I now know the true identity of my childhood friend."

"You had friends?"

"Hey! Even I had one or two... Well, no, it was just one. But he was real!"

I chased my poor-mannered butler out of the room in a fit of anger.



AFTER the boy arrived at the Liddell estate, he spent all his time keeping himself locked up in the guest room.

Feeling adventurous, I wandered through the trap-laden mansion and arrived at his doorway.

“Aren’t you bored in that room? Why don’t you play with me instead?”

Like any four-year-old, I didn’t feel a single ounce of fear interacting with a stranger.

I crept toward him, which sent the boy into quite a panic.

“S-Stay back! Bad things will happen if you talk to me.” He was mumbling as he pulled the sheet down tighter over his body.

I chased him around the room as he tried to escape me.

“I’m the Liddells’ daughter, and I’m not scared of you one bit.”

“You should be. It’s my fault that Mother—”

“I don’t care about your mother. Who are you? What’s your name?”

“D-Don’t!”

The boy retreated to the back of the room and curled up under the large window.

His trembling hands, clutching the sheet around himself, were completely pale.

I kept my distance that time and crouched down, placing my chin in my hands to observe the boy.

The sheet made his head look perfectly round, but it was casting two long shadows on the floor, sprouting out from his skull. He looked just like the wild rabbits I’d seen while playing tag with Jack in the garden.

Picturing how they hopped across the grass, I suddenly had an idea.

“If you won’t tell me, then I’ll make up my own name for you. You’re ‘Rabbit’ now. I’m really good at chasing rabbits. Ready, set... go!”

I raced to the window at full speed and wrapped my arms around the sheet that covered Rabbit.

“EEK!”

“Caught you! Will you be my friend, Rabbit?”



"I can't. What if something happens?"

"Then we can fix it together! And we've got Her Majesty to protect the people of the kingdom like us, so she won't let anything bad happen. C'mon, let's shake on it, as friends!"

I stuck my hand under his sheet. Rabbit returned the gesture and timidly squeezed my hand.

"...Okay."

At that moment, I could see beautiful silver strands of hair peeking out from under the fabric.

It looked nothing like the white fur of the wild rabbits I used to chase.



"...RABBIT."

I opened my eyes and awoke from the distant memory. The light from the setting sun poured in through my window and painted the room orange. Hisui's water lantern appeared to have burned out, as the space on top of my bedside table was empty.

"It's almost evening already. I slept through the whole day."

The Tweedles were gone by that point. I assumed Leeds and Jack were back from their outings as well.

Just as I set my feet on the ground, the rays of sun beneath them suddenly darkened.

Something's outside.

I reached for the gun under my pillow and stared out the window.

There was a figure standing there, but it wasn't Jack, Leeds, Dum, or Dee. It could only be an intruder. I watched as they placed their hands against the glass, as if to peer into my room.

Their shadow bore two horns sprouting from their head—the mark of a demon!

As soon as I saw them try to open the window, I pulled the trigger.

The glass shattered with a loud bang. The intruder quickly retreated from the window.

"ALICE!"

Four voices cried out upon hearing that sound. They rushed into the room.

Leeds immediately went to check the window, while the twins guarded both sides of my bed. Jack turned back toward the door and held up his sword so that no one else could enter.

“Where is he?”

“He ran. It’ll be night soon, so don’t chase him. But I’d like you to search the mansion, just to be sure.”

I walked to the broken window and leaned out far enough to look outside.

I spotted something shiny stuck to the window frame. Picking it up and examining it, I saw it was a sapphire-encrusted brooch made in the shape of a rabbit.

At that moment, I was overcome with the same excitement I felt as I chased after the hopping rabbits all those years ago.

“So I get another chance to catch you... Hehehe!”

“A-Are you all right, my lady?”

All they could do was look at each other in confusion as they watched me chuckle to myself.

Chapter 6: Liddell Family Troubles

LONDON was always quiet and tranquil in the early morning.

White smoke billowed from the sleepy city, carrying the scent of freshly baked bread toward the sky. You could run into just about anyone on the streets of London in the morning. Unless, of course, they were trapped in eternal slumber.

Arriving in Mayfair, I stepped out of the carriage and looked up at the giant mansion before me. It still bore the crescent moon seal on its gate.

The white walls caught the light of the sun and reflected it back into my eyes.

As I held up my arm to protect my vision, the old butler appeared in the entryway.

“Oh my, what a surprise to see you, Miss Liddell. Welcome to the Knightley residence.”

“Is Dark home today?”

“He just finished his breakfast and is now in the library. You may wait for him in the lounge.”

“Actually, he doesn’t know I’m here today. I’d like to go see him directly. Could you show me the way?”

“Why, of course. This way, my lady.”

He smiled at me despite my unorthodox request.

Together we walked down the hallways lined with paintings of crescent moons until we arrived at the same room I had been taken to during the ball. I bid the butler farewell and opened the door without a knock of warning.

Inside, the window destroyed by Jack had since been repaired, and the white furniture showed no traces of burns. Even the blue roses had been refreshed and arranged neatly. In the cold light of day, they almost looked artificial.

Dark was sitting at the desk underneath the window, holding a newspaper up in front of him. I couldn’t see him directly, but under the bright rays of the morning sun, I could make out two horns sticking up on the shadow his head cast against the paper.

“Gramps, take a look at this article. They’re speculating that the Sleeping Beauties were ‘taken to the land of slumber by a fairy with a taste for fair noblewomen.’ Can’t we ask them not to print these absurdities?”

“I see you’re at it bright and early today, Dark.”

Dark lowered the newspaper once he heard my voice. His blue eyes went wide as he looked at me.

“Alice...?”

“Good morning. I came here today to discuss something with you. Is this a good time?”

He quickly grabbed his nearby hat and placed it on his head. My best guess was that it was supposed to be playing-card themed, as a deck of cards had been stitched into the fabric in diagonal lines. They were separated by a pattern of tiny swords. A string of frilly lace hung over the brim.

“And what a glorious morning it is to be graced by your presence here in my home! How should I express these profound emotions? What say we declare today our anniversary?”

“Do as you please. But may I take a look at what’s under here?”

I strolled up to Dark and lifted the hat off his head. Though I rummaged through his glossy silver hair with my hands, I couldn’t find the signature mark of a demon.

“...They’re not here...”

“What’s wrong? Did you see something strange on my head?”

“I thought so. But I didn’t get much sleep last night, so perhaps it was actually a dream.”

Dark saw me clutch at my forehead with my hand. He stood up to close the curtains.

“Not only is sleep deprivation bad for your skin, but it’ll take its toll on your mind as well.”

“It certainly seems so. I’m sure I imagined that demon last night too. There’s no way a demon would leave something behind at the scene of the crime.”

“...Leave something behind?”

Dark turned around when he heard this. His face was unusually stiff.

In my mind, I was laughing. I knew I finally had him cornered.

“An intruder dropped this while trying to get into my room. Have you seen it before?” I unpinned the brooch from my dress.

"You're quite well-known for your love of fine clothes. Always waltzing around with all those accessories... They're quite nice, but I bet you wouldn't even notice if one of them slipped off your outfit, would you?"

I approached the desk and set the brooch down in front of him. Dark still didn't respond.

"Your outfits are purchased on Savile Row, from the most popular shop of them all: Rupert Henry. Jack spotted the label when he tried to take your coat."

I had visited the tailor last night. When I told him we were looking for the owner of the pin, he stroked his hair and told us it was a custom brooch made for Earl Knightley.

"The tailor said he always takes great care when he works on your creations, and that you come in with the same request each time. You bring him a uniquely made hat and ask him to design an outfit that it will suit."

"...All my hats are made by a hatter I employ. I don't want to ruin his carefully crafted pieces, so I plan my outfits around them. What of it?"

He was keeping his cool. In other circumstances, he probably could have talked his way out of it, but this time, I had an actual piece of evidence.

I stuck the brooch to his hat and, ever so slowly, stroked the brim.

"Your hats are covered in ribbons and decorations that make them tall and lumpy. I'm sure they're quite hefty, and yet you continue to put up with that weight for each and every hat... because of this!"

"...?!"

With the force of all the anger I'd been carrying, I yanked down on the brim as hard as I could. Dark's shoulders leaped up as his eyes were suddenly covered by the hat. I whisked open the curtains and lowered myself onto Dark's lap.

The morning sun beamed down and cast Dark's shadow over the desk. It was lumpy from the shape of the decorations on his hat, but I saw the outline of his true form when I lifted up the hat.

Stretching up and out of his head, in the shape of rabbit ears, was a pair of horns.

It was absolute proof that Dark was a demon.

"Since you can't hide the shadow of your horns, you wear

those outrageous hats as camouflage, and the flashy outfits are so that the hats don't seem out of place. As long as you kept up the appearance of a fashion aficionado, no one would think twice about how eccentrically you dressed."

"Looks like I've been beat... You're brilliant, you know that?"

Dark threw his hands up in resignation.

"To lose something at the scene... That was a failure on my part. Hisui informed me that you were injured, so I went to the Liddell property to check on you. I wasn't wearing my hat so that I wouldn't stand out, but I see now that it was a mistake. You didn't hesitate to fire... Or did you know it was me when you shot?"

"I didn't hit you, did I?"

"Is that really the issue? You didn't need to shoot in the first place."

"If you didn't want to be shot at, you should have come through the front door. I can't have you sneaking through my window just because you think you're some kind of Romeo."

"Still as stubborn as ever, Alice," Dark responded with an awkward smile. "It was your father who taught me how to hide my horns, since he knew about demons. The horns don't appear to the outside world anymore, but there's no way to stop them from showing on my shadow. This was the only way I could be a part of high society. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

"No, it's not. I'm sure you would have preferred to stay hidden under your sheet, but you managed to overcome your fear and step out into the world."

I put my hands on Dark's cheeks. The sight of my face reflected in his bright blue eyes filled me with a soothing sense of nostalgia.

"I'm glad to see you again, Rabbit."

"...I've missed you."

Dark leaned his forehead against mine and smiled shyly, making my heart skip a tiny beat. The morning sunlight enveloped and warmed both my body and soul.

At that moment, as I sat there feeling complete, I realized something important.

I bet I just scored romance points with Dark!

This was bad. Dark was a first-time love interest for Alice, and I had no idea what kind of story his route entailed.

Not to mention, he was actually a demon.

This seemed like the perfect opportunity for the developers to go all out with one of their perilous stories.

Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?!

“Still... I do love girls who are bold, but it’s hard to decide if I should make the next move here or not,” said Dark.

He leaned his head away from my forehead, which was now covered in a cold sweat.

“I can’t say I’m used to women crawling into my lap. Here you are putting yourself out there, so it would almost be a waste if I didn’t respond. But I don’t think it’s right to steal a woman’s sacred chastity before we have a chance to pledge our holy vows.”

“Ch-Chastity?!” I fired back in shock. “Don’t get the wrong idea! You and I are nothing more than friends!”

“I thought you didn’t have any friends?”

“!”

He snickered as he saw me lost for words. I didn’t know he was the type to hold a grudge.

“I was sad to hear you say you didn’t have friends. In fact, it formed a crack right through my heart. But perhaps a kiss of friendship could prove to me that you really do care.”

“You just want to kiss me, don’t you?!”

He wrapped me in his arms to keep me on his lap.

Dark held me in a strong embrace. His eyes were locked on mine, filled with passion and intensity.

“Yes. I do, if you’ll let me.”

“You’ll just do it either way...”

It wasn’t a very romantic response. I slowly closed my eyes, feeling Dark’s face approach mine. My pulse was racing. I knew I was on the verge of having my heart stolen, but there wasn’t a single part of me that was afraid.

Because I want this too...

“So close. Yes.”

Just before our lips met, I heard a familiar accent close to my ear. I moved away from Dark to look in the direction of the voice. There sat Hisui, intensely staring at us, with his elbows on the desk to prop up his head.

“H-How long have you been standing there, Mr. Hisui?”

“A while. Please go on.”

“That...isn’t very encouraging.”

Dark’s lap was now an embarrassing place to be, so I stood up

again. He was staring at his servant, disappointment written all over his face.

"Hisui, please be a bit more subtle next time..."

"Aww. It is over?"

"I appreciate the sympathy. Why aren't you working?"

Hisui clapped his hands together, appearing to have remembered something.

"That is right. An announcement. Something is here."

"...A guest?"

This felt like an immediate death flag as a result of earning romance points with Dark. He stood up and Hisui grabbed his jacket from the nearby coatrack.

"The butler is holding them off. You must go now."

"Understood. I'll have to remember to give Gramps a raise on his next paycheck. I'm going to leave for a while."

"Have a good trip."

Hisui pressed his hand to his chest. Just then, multiple pairs of feet pounding against the floor could be heard from the hallway.

Dark grabbed hold of my arm and started to leave.

"We can't take the hall. Where are we going?"

"There's an emergency escape."

He was heading toward a heavy-looking shelf filled with leather-bound reference books.

"W-Wait, that's a bookcase!" I shouted.

Dark showed no sign of slowing. He just continued to pick up speed.

We're going to crash!

I squeezed my eyes shut to brace for the impact, but what I felt was the two of us spinning in a circle on our toes, like ballerinas onstage.

A cold breeze against my cheek prompted me to open my eyes again. Somehow, we had jumped into an entirely different room.

"Wh-What?!"

I turned around in shock and saw the bookcase rotate back around to its original position.

"A trick door...!"

"Seeing you so surprised makes me glad I had it made. It's one of those trompe l'oeil pieces that are so popular these days. The door to this hidden room is made of leather strips that look like the spines of books, perfectly disguising them as part of the library. Not

unlike a ninja's trap, no? Though, this one was my idea."

Dark was busy singing his own praises when we heard the footsteps rush into the library behind us.

"Come with us, Lord Knightley! As the main suspect in the Sleeping Beauty cases... Wait, he's gone!"

We peered through the trick door. The man who had burst into the room was one of the policemen Dark was investigating. He was surrounded by several other officers, all gripping their batons.

Once they saw that Dark wasn't in the room, they began to question Hisui.

"Oi, you there. Where's the earl?"

"Oh gosh. I no speak English!" Hisui shrugged his shoulders very dramatically.

"Mr. Hisui...!" I cried.

I was nearly moved to tears, seeing Hisui so cleverly taking on the role we needed.

"I guess Hisui deserves a raise too."

Dark knelt down and pulled open a trapdoor on the ground. He reached his hand out for me.

"There's a passageway underneath here."

Everything under the hole in the floor was pitch-black.

For a moment, I felt as if that darkness was going to swallow me up. I gulped.

"You can't see a thing down there."

"Are you scared?" he asked me.

"We don't have time to hesitate."

Dark would be arrested if the cops managed to find us. Since he was being treated as a suspect, they wouldn't allow him to wear his eccentric outfits, for fear of him hiding a weapon on his person. If that led to them noticing the shadow of his horns and discovering his identity as a demon, his life would forever be drastically changed.

"Let's go, Dark. Anywhere but here."

"Then I shall take you to Wonderland, my fair lady. May I have your hand?"

I wrapped my fingers around Dark's outstretched hand.

"Please be gentle."

"But of course."

He placed the palm of his hand over my mouth.

I let out a yelp of surprise, but by then, we had already jumped

into the escape hatch.

I did my best not to scream as we tumbled upside down into the darkness.



“**IT’S** too sweet. I can’t eat this with clotted cream or jam.”

Everyone was gathered in the conservatory of the Liddell estate. Jack had bitten into one of the scones in the center of the long dining table.

But Alice was not sitting in her designated chair. She was still sound asleep in her bed, later than usual for her.

The Tweedle brothers munched away on slices of chiffon cake drizzled in honey.

Leeds sat across from Jack. He was drinking a steaming cup of coffee and appeared to still be half-asleep, despite the time of day.

“All-nighters are simply the worst...” He yawned.

“You did good, Leeds!” “You did good, Leeds!”

He managed a wink in response to the twins’ synchronized praise.

“Thanks, my dear boys. My heart is light as a feather as long as I can protect you and our sleeping lady.”

The staff at the Liddell estate took turns patrolling the grounds at night. The routine included standing watch in the tower on the roof, then patrolling the inside of the house to defend against intruders.

“I’m glad nothing happened last night. I was awfully frightened that some hoodlum would sneak into Miss Alice’s room.”

“Hoodlum...”

Jack thought back to the previous night.

Alice had fired at the Peeping Tom outside her room, then found something the intruder had left behind at the window. Right away, she knew where she needed to go. The address was for a gentleman’s clothing store that made outfits for Lord Knightley.

Alice had thoroughly questioned the tailor about the earl.

Jack felt agitated when he remembered that earnest look on her face.

“...Why is Miss Alice so curious about Lord Knightley, anyway?”

“Well, that’s an easy one. It’s all so she can solve the Sleeping Beauty cases.”

Leeds smeared jam over a cracker and took a bite. The dough had been coated with butter to give it a nice crunch. Delicious as it was, Leeds was scattering crumbs with each bite.

But what bothered Jack wasn’t the dirty floor. It was Leeds’s response to his question.

“All she needs is information on the culprit. The earl has nothing to do with that.”

“Maybe he has something to do with Alice’s life, instead?”

“Maybe it’s a desire of Alice’s heart, instead?”

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

With forks and knives still in hand, the twins mustered up their best “mature” voices.

“Dark Arland Knightley is a tall, beautiful man.”

“Dark Arland Knightley is a rich, high-ranking noble.”

“So what? Are you trying to say Miss Alice is in love with him?”

To be the head of the Liddell family was to live isolated from everyone else. Though the mission of protecting Great Britain from the shadows was a just cause, executing the threats to the kingdom earned their family plenty of enemies.

Placing your trust in anyone would only lead to betrayal, followed by death.

No one should know not to let her guard down better than Alice.

“She cares for us as much as we care about her. No one can ever get between that. It’s just who we are to each other.” Jack furrowed his brow and clenched his fist as he spoke.

From under the table, his stigma was aching. But the intensity wasn’t in the back of his hands—it was his heart that was burning up.

Jack had pledged his absolute loyalty to Alice. He would give his life for her and take the life of anyone she asked. He was glad that he had become a stigmata alongside her. Even being branded with a stigma made him feel special, like he was now her knight in shining armor.

He never desired a romance with Alice. Jack always believed that being by her side as a worker for the Liddell family was all he needed.

If Alice did fall in love with a man and passed the Liddells' work on to him, Jack felt as if his flames of rage would consume her fair skin, her sincere smile, and her innocent heart.

He hated himself for these thoughts. Jack kicked at a chair from under the table.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it..."

"Calm yourself, Jack. Besides, don't you think she's been sleeping a bit too long this morning?" Leeds asked him.

Jack glanced at the wall clock and saw that the two hands were pointing straight up.

It was almost noon already.

"Should we wake her?" "Should we wake her?"

"You two would just take a nap with her. I'll do it."

Right as Jack stood up, the door to the conservatory flung open.

"I made some delicious paninis, kids!"

Bear stood there with a crooked chef's hat hanging off his head. The paninis, a kind of Italian sandwich, were spread out across three trays that he handled gracefully. Bear set them down on the table.

"They're filled with olive-and-onion-flavored cream cheese, asparagus wrapped in roast beef, boiled eggs, and pickled peppers. I've also got berry mille-feuille with chocolate whip to enjoy for dessert!"

"Woow!" cheered both twins.

The boys gathered around the table, but Bear was surprised to see Jack leaving the room.

"You don't want any, Jack?"

"I'm just going to wake Miss Alice. I'll be back soon."

"But she's already up. I crossed paths with Alice this morning as she left. She said she was going for a walk."

Jack's eyes went wide when he heard this.

"You saw her? When?"

Jack remembered seeing Bear already working in the kitchen when he came in to start preparing breakfast. That was just after six in the morning.

"It must have been before six. I found some ripe berries and told her I was plannin' to make tarts. She said she was lookin' forward to her afternoon tea!"

Hearing this, Jack clicked his tongue. Leeds and the twins

stood up with pale faces.

Bear, the only person in the room who was confused, threw his hands up in the air. "Uh-oh. Where are you all off to?"

Jack retrieved his sword from where it leaned against the wall.

"She wouldn't go on a six-hour walk! We have to go find Miss Alice!" he barked.



I stood trembling in front of a mirror so large it looked like it could swallow me up.

"Why must I change clothes...? And into such a strange costume, much less!"

I had donned the outfit of an Arabian dancer.

The top was small enough that my stomach was exposed for all to see. The outer jacket was made of thin fabric that was all too transparent. My sleeves were loose and more for decoration than function, and the cloth around my waist even had slits up the sides.

Even though I was used to wearing frilly undergarments, it was an outfit I simply wasn't bold enough to wear. I looked myself up and down in the mirror, shocked to see how much of my body I was revealing.

"I don't suppose you have anything that shows a bit less skin...?"

"I'm sorry, but we don't have any long skirts on hand here."

The woman helping me dress smiled as she clasped accessories around my arms, wrists, and neck.

"You wear it well. Lord Knightley personally chose this outfit, so I'm sure he'll be quite taken with it."

"Dark did...?" Hearing his name turned my mood from embarrassed to irritated. "Why, he's just behind everything, isn't he?!"

After plummeting upside down through the dark passageway, we had escaped through a waterway beneath the Knightley residence.

The dark water carried us forward until we emerged in a small stream, flowing freely beneath the blue sky. It was located in a suburb of London.

"We can't be long or the police will find us."

My skirt was heavy with water as we climbed the rocky terrain. I tried to wring it out, and Dark flapped his hat beside me to dry it.

“Don’t worry. The door to Wonderland is open,” he responded.

He gestured toward a carriage parked beside the bank. The driver lifted his cap with a nod. It was none other than the old Knightley butler who held the reins.

The two of us boarded the carriage in our soaking clothes, and after some time, we arrived at our destination.

“Dark, are you finished changing?”

Once I pushed through the golden doors, I couldn’t help but gulp when I saw the sight before me.

“How beautiful...”

Many white strips of fabric hung down from the ceiling and draped across the floor like fairy beds. Glass columns stood to the left and right, but they were filled with water for tropical fish to swim in, reflecting the light from the surrounding lanterns. The reflection of the water spread throughout the whole room, flickering and swaying against the walls and floor.

“Welcome, Alice. Come on in.”

Dark, who finished dressing before me, now looked just like the king of a faraway land.

He was draped in glossy silk robes with a gold belt strapped around his midriff and bracelets on his wrists. A thin cloth hung down over his head from a black ring.

It was too much for my delicate heart. Before I knew it, I was covering my eyes.

This is totally a new CG! This outfit will be made into a bunch of merch and get so popular that it sells out before the preorders end! I can tell, even without looking!

If I hadn’t been hit by that car in my past life, I could imagine myself rushing to the official website and preordering all that merch without a single ounce of hesitation. If there’s one thing otome gamers can’t resist, it’s a good costume change.

“I’d call this place ‘Wonderland,’ wouldn’t you? I had it designed to resemble a desert palace.”

Dark was also famous for his business ventures, including remodeling old buildings for profit. On the outside, our current location looked like any other stone building you would find in

Great Britain.

The chandelier cast light over the furniture and fish tanks from above.

The shadows it produced were so warped, not even Dark's horns were being projected on the ground, even without a hat.

But why do I have to join him in this silly little cosplay episode?

I sat down next to him, pouting, and he stared at me curiously.

"Alice, why are you angry?"

"I'm just shocked by your tastes. Must we really change clothes just to have tea? What a strange place."

"This shop would lose its impact if it were nothing but decorations. I believe an outfit is the key to producing a suitable atmosphere, so we provide Arabian-style outfits to all our customers."

"Well, we're not customers, are we?!"

"If you want to hide a tree, you should find a forest. Without this, my dignified aura as a nobleman would be plain for everyone to see!"

"Are you right in the head?" I couldn't help but ask him.

Dark lifted a drink from the tray and handed it to me.

"Alice, I'm on the run right now. I'd like to be able to have *some* fun in the meantime."

"But I'm not one of their suspects."

"That true. But you still came here with me...and I'm glad you did."

His smile was so pure, it made me lose my words.

He's a demon who smiles like an angel. I wonder if he knows what a deadly combination that is!

I finished my glass of cold tropical juice and composed myself.

"I want to get everything straight. Do you have any idea why the police would barge into your home like that?"

"I know that the Sleeping Beauty of the Silent family was a guest at the ball I hosted, and all the other victims were acquaintances of mine, at the very least. Now that Miss Tierra is the next victim, it's only natural that I'd be suspected."

"And how much have you learned about the cases?"

"Probably about as much as you have. The culprit is most likely a demon or stigmata with superhuman abilities. All I know for sure is that I had nothing to do with them."

"...Right."

I wanted to believe in his innocence. But as the head of the Liddell family, there was no way I could give him special treatment and act like he wasn't a suspect.

Dark took the empty glass from my hand as I struggled with my thoughts.

"Our main priority should be waking the Sleeping Beauties. Regardless of who caused it, they'll die if they sleep for too long."

Humans breathe and circulate blood when they're asleep, but without food and water, the body becomes malnourished, and weakened from a lack of movement.

The longer they sleep, the closer they creep toward death.

I felt the blood drain from my face as I remembered Madeline.

"I think all the Sleeping Beauties were in love with you. In the fairy tale, the princess wakes up when she receives true love's kiss. Wouldn't it be worth a try?"

"You want me to kiss those girls?"

To my surprise, I felt Dark take hold of my face and turn my head toward him. His beautiful features were puffed up into a pout. He looked like bread dough that was starting to rise.

"How cruel. Since you're to be my bride soon, I'd rather hear 'No! I'm the only girl you're allowed to kiss!'"

"That hasn't been decided yet! And stop trying to cuddle me!"

I didn't want him so close to me—at least, not in such a revealing outfit.

I turned away from him and saw our shadows change in the new light.

Dark's head showed his usual two rabbit's-ear horns.

But for some reason, a single sprout like a small bamboo shoot was sticking out of my head too.

"A demon!"

I reached for my bag, but it was gone. I'd left it back in the changing room.

I shuddered upon realizing I was unarmed. Just then, I heard Dark's voice from behind me. It was so deep, it sent chills down my spine.

"Can't they learn some manners?"

I turned to see that the two long, sharp horns had materialized above his head.

He looked the part of a real demon now. With one hand, Dark pushed down on the floor and produced rays of blue light with his

palm. Just like that, his entire hand began to sink into the floor itself, as if it were a small body of water.

The blue light expanded and formed a circle with him at the center. The crescent moon seal rose up and surrounded his body.



That's the shape of Mr. Hisui's stigma!

It was nothing like the venomous rose seal that Jack and the others bore. The only sharp angles were the tips of the slim moon. Pale blue stars twinkled in the sky behind it.

"There it is," said Dark.

He pulled his arm out of the floor and held up a round shadow in the shape of a griffin. If Dum and Dee saw the thing, they'd surely beg me to let them keep it as a pet.

"How cute. Is that a minor demon?"

"It's even lower than that. This is a familiar being controlled by a greater demon. What do you want?" he asked it.

The familiar could only screech out a shrill response.

"Sorry. I don't speak that language."

Dark crushed the familiar in his hands. The shadow shriveled in his grasp like a deflated balloon.

"Are you hurt, Alice?"

"I'm fine. So you truly are a demon, huh..."

I took a long, hard look at Dark.

Pointed horns stuck out of his head. Veins bulged along his hands and sharp claws jutted from his fingers. His handsome face and silver hair were unchanged, but for some reason, they seemed more alluring with the rest of his devilish features.

"No one's ever seen my real horns before. Do they frighten you?"

"Not at all. They're unique and pointy, but I certainly don't hate them."

It was a very genuine answer. Dark looked taken aback, but then he burst out laughing.

"I see. So you don't hate them!"

"Why do you laugh at the strangest moments? Did I say something funny?"

"You shot at me, yet you're not scared of my horns. You're a unique woman, but I certainly don't hate you."

"I can't tell if that's praise or not..." I said, even though he was repeating my own words.

I chuckled and Dark placed the tips of his claws on my shoulder to bring me toward him.

I stared up at Dark with a bit of hope in my heart. He tilted his head as I drew closer to his face.

I closed my eyes, expecting a kiss to come. At that moment...

"She's in here! Miss Alice!"

Jack kicked open the door and burst into the room with a glare on his face. Leeds and the Tweedles filed in behind him. They were all out of breath.

Jack's hands, perhaps from his anger, were displaying the crest of his stigma. The twins' cheeks were the same. I assumed Leeds's stigma on his tongue was activated as well.

When they saw Dark drawing toward me, his horns visible to all of them, the four each drew their weapons.

"You bastard! You're a demon?!"

Dark raised one eyebrow in surprise to see Jack's blade pointed at him.

"Does it matter if I am? You may be a skilled guard dog, but I wonder how you managed to sniff us out..."

He looked around at the others until he spotted Hisui hiding behind one of the pillars of water.

"Hisui, I could have sworn I asked you to stay at home. I don't remember ordering you to chase me down," he said with a sigh.

"I am sorry. Everyone was worried..."

"Such trouble you've caused me. Here's your punishment."

Dark extended his index finger and sent out a beam of blue light towards Hisui. I thought it was going to envelop him, but instead, it met with a flash from the stigma on the side of Hisui's stomach.

"Ouch...!"

He bent over in pain. Dark twirled his finger in circles, causing water to sprout forth from Hisui's hands. The streams of water shot through the air and wrapped the other four boys inside a dome of water.

"The Liddell stigmata need to spend some time cooling down."

"Damn it! What is this thing?!"

Jack tried to destroy the dome with his flames, but the water immediately extinguished them.

"Stigmata can't defeat a demon. Or didn't you know?"

Dark placed his hands on my hips—the ultimate provocation.

"Don't you dare touch her, you demon!"

"Listen to yourself. Do you think it's any better for you, a stigmata, to be with Alice?"

The conversation had taken a sudden turn for the worse. I

looked up at Dark.

“D-Don’t do this...,” I begged, my voice trembling.

But he had lost his temper. Dark ignored me and continued to reveal my secret.

“I’ve always found it strange how Alice, a girl without a stigma, can command a group of stigmata.”

“I!”

I thought my heart was going to stop.

As I stood there shuddering, unable to move, the twins cocked their heads curiously.

“What do you mean?” “What do you mean?”

“I guess this man never got the memo,” Leeds scoffed. “Each and every one of us under the Liddell roof is a demon child, including Miss Alice.”

“But that isn’t true. The stigma that Alice was supposed to receive...” Dark pointed his sharp claw at the smoldering Jack. “... is there, on her guard dog’s hand. Each person is supposed to receive a single stigma, but he has one on the back of each hand. The only explanation is that he received punishment for himself and someone else.”

“Please stop, Dark...!”

He closed his mouth when he heard my plea, but it was far too late. Jack went still, the twins looked at each other, and Leeds turned toward me with a stern expression.

“My lady, is it true that you don’t have a stigma?”

“I...”

Their suspicion would only worsen if I kept quiet, but I couldn’t get past the lump in my throat. I just shrunk like a scolded child who had no way of talking back.

“...It’s true,” Jack said. “I took Miss Alice’s stigma when we were resurrected. It means she’s not a stigmata. When she dies, she’ll go to heaven on her own, while the rest of us go to hell...”

“How could you keep that from us? This is the first I’m hearing of it!”

“Leeds! Don’t blame Jack. I asked him to keep it a secret. And I had a good reason to—”

“Just stop already!”

Two sad voices chimed out in unison, cutting off my explanation. I looked up to see Dum and Dee staring at me with their large eyes full of tears.

"You lied to us, Alice."

"You tricked us, Alice."

"That's not true. Dum, Dee, just listen to me!"

"No way!" "No way!"

They covered their ears. My heart broke to be rejected by them.

Dark let the water dome fall, and the twins turned their backs toward me to exit the room.

"I don't like being lied to either." Leeds retied his chain belt as he spoke. "I thought we were a real family, my lady. We were like sisters who told each other everything. But I guess you didn't feel the same."

He rested his hand on his shawl and turned away from me.

"...Farewell, my lady... Miss Liddell, that is."

"Wait! Listen to m— Ahh!"

I tried to chase them, but my foot caught on a cloth on the floor. I fell to the ground.

"Please don't leave me..."

I reached out and shouted for them, but not one of the boys stopped in their tracks.

Tears poured from my eyes and blurred my vision.

I was empty inside. My chest ached like it had caved in.

I couldn't stand on my own, so I curled up on the ground and tried to hide my face.

"Why did you lie to them, Alice?" came Dark's voice.

He leaned down beside me. I still felt like I was in a trance as I spoke. "Do you have the strength to tell people you're a demon, even when they don't know a thing? It's just like that..."

I was too scared to tell the stigmata that I wasn't like them.

If they knew I was resurrected without a stigma...if they knew I wouldn't go to hell upon my death...I feared they would hate me for it.

But in the end, it just meant I didn't believe in my family with all my heart.

"Trust only leads to betrayal."

Father always tried to teach me that lesson. He surely never imagined that the two of us would be separated so early in life, but now it was my own fault that I'd lost the new family I was so desperate to create.

"I understand now, Father..."

This was the secret of the otome game I so adored in my past life.

Even without a stigma, Alice still received punishment for her resurrection.

“This world is my own form of hell...”

Chapter 7: The Devilish Love Pact

I followed Jack home until we finally reached the Liddell estate. Bear was sitting on a stump in front of the gate. He sprung up in relief once he laid eyes on us.

“Do you have any idea how late it is? I was so worried! Where are the other three?”

“Just listen, Bear. They aren’t coming back...”

Bear’s large mouth fell open at Jack’s response.

“What do you mean they’re not comin’ back?! What happened, Alice?!”

“I can’t go into it right now. Please go home for the evening, Uncle Bear.”

Despite my unkind words, Bear continued to trail behind us down the brick walkway.

“I want a real answer first! What happened to the kids?!”

“Bear, just drop it for now.”

I stepped into the house with the sound of Jack’s persistent voice behind me. Reaching my bedroom, I removed my coat and dress before falling straight into bed, wearing only my petticoat.

The sky had turned a vivid orange outside my window. A dark night would soon follow.

Where would the boys spend this night, now that they weren’t coming home?

What if it was someplace cold? What if it was someplace lonely?

“Dum? Dee? Leeds...?”

I called their names but received no response, even though I didn’t expect one. The words just slipped out of my mouth automatically.

Tears spilled from my eyes and down my cheeks, forming dark spots on my bedsheets.

Somehow, it sounded louder than the roar of any rainstorm.

I watched with blurry eyes as the sky lost all color, until the cold night was finally upon me.

“My lady, I sent Bear home... Are you crying?”

Jack entered my room and sat quietly on the edge of my bed. He wiped my tears away with his fingers.

“Don’t cry for things that can’t be undone. It’ll just make you sad.”

“I’m not sad because I’m crying. I’m crying because I’m sad.”

“Is there any difference?”

Jack furrowed his brow in confusion.

Though I disagreed that tears of regret were wasteful, Jack didn’t seem to feel the same. He only saw one problem before him: Alice was crying. But the cause of it eluded him.

This discrepancy only made me feel worse, and I ended up losing my temper.

“Jack. Why did you have to receive my stigma? I should have been reborn as a stigmata like you. Why wouldn’t you let me?”

“It’s not that simple. I couldn’t let you end up in hell while your mother and father are waiting for you in heaven.”

“Do you really think the residents of this house are all in heaven right now?”

“Of course. They’re watching over you from above right this very minute.”

He was so confident. I didn’t even know how to respond.

Jack believed that my mother, father, and all our servants had gone to heaven. He made that deal with a demon, unable to allow the only daughter of the house to end up in hell.

He didn’t even hesitate to bargain with his own life...

Jack’s heart was destroyed on that tragic night...

He wasn’t aware of that fact either. He just continued to faithfully serve me as he always did.

I had no way of fixing him, nor did I have a mind to abandon him.

“Jack, just let me say this much. If it wasn’t right for me to receive a stigma, then it wasn’t right for you either.”

“That shouldn’t bother you, my lady. Nobles and commoners—they all die in the end. Everyone’s life is equally worthless. So what if a few people are reborn along the way? No one would even notice if one of those ‘demon children’ didn’t have a stigma...”

Jack gently laid me down in bed like he was putting a baby to sleep.

He then placed the palm of his hand against mine.

“Forget it. First thing in the morning, we’re going to rebuild the Liddell family from scratch. As long as you’re here, we can start over. As long as we don’t lose you, we can always...”

The stigma on Jack’s hands began to appear. It was like his words were calling it forth.

His skin felt like fire against my palm.

“I’ll take on every burden so that you don’t have to. I want you to stay exactly the way you are.”

He lay down next to me, still holding my hand, and soon I could hear the gentle sound of his breathing as he drifted off to sleep.

A single tear escaped from under his eyelid. It was proof of the same sorrow I felt from losing three of our family members.

“You wanted to cry too, Jack. I’m sorry I didn’t notice...”

I was placing a blanket over him when I suddenly sensed something outside the window.

Quietly, I tiptoed toward the glass balcony door and pulled it open.

A familiar face was leaning against the railing, enjoying the breezy night wind.

“Lovely evening, isn’t it, Alice?”

Dark’s back was turned away from the vast starry sky. He wore an indigo top hat decorated with an armillary sphere and a matching frock coat of the same color. Pinned to his chest was the shiny rabbit brooch.

He could have passed as a messenger from the night sky above us.

I stepped onto the balcony and shut the door behind me.

“You certainly love to show up in front of windows.”

“I’m scared of all those traps set in your house. And isn’t this way more romantic? I would love to add a bit more passion to tonight’s rendezvous, but it looks like your guard dog is sleeping, so I’ll be sure to keep quiet. Hisui kept insisting that I bring this to you.”

Dark took out the water lantern he’d been carrying under his arm and twirled it on his finger like a basketball.

“I keep telling him that demons can’t enter this house, and yet he still worries.”

“I’m curious. Why is it that demons can’t enter the Liddell estate?”

A creature that takes the form of shadows should have no trouble getting in or out of any house.

Though the world we live in appears to operate on random chance, truly illogical occurrences are almost nonexistent. If a demon can't get somewhere, then there must be a good reason for it.

"That's an answer I can't give you for free," Dark responded bluntly. "I have something I'm curious about as well. Why don't we exchange information, Miss Head of the Liddell House?"

"It would be my pleasure, Lord Knightley."

I turned toward him and stood up straight.

"No need to look so tough," Dark said with a laugh. "I want to know about the stigmata of the Liddell estate. Did they die in the same place, at the same time?"

"Their deaths were under different circumstances. Jack died with me here in the house on the night of that tragedy. Leeds was the victim of the first case I ever solved, and the Tweedles were already stigmata when I met them. One of my relatives introduced them to me."

"Who would that be?"

"My uncle Bernard. He runs an orphanage outside of the East End where he took in Dum and Dee."

"Why do you suppose those twins were the only two he ever brought home to meet you?"

"Because they were...stigmata...?"

Something felt wrong about the statement as soon as it left my lips. I first met the Tweedle brothers during a tour of the orphanage. Since I was one of the nobles who donated money to the establishment, I had been invited as a courtesy.

Bear led the twins over to see me while I was chatting with the manager.

"Alice, these two are a fine pair of boys. They would make great additions to our family!"

"...I took them in at his recommendation."

My mind was racing, but Dark didn't allow me the time to collect my thoughts.

"Now it's my turn to fill you in. How much do you know about stigmata?"

"It's the mark of a human who has been resurrected. It represents their fate to be sent to hell upon their death. Besides

that, I only know that the stigma grants the human supernatural powers that correspond with their manner of death.”

“I see. In that case, allow me to explain in more detail.”

Blue light spilled out of his fingertips and formed a crescent moon emblem on the surface of the water lantern.

“This here is a demon crest, and it’s one that only I can use. If I bestow it on someone who has passed, they will be reborn, and the crest will become their stigma. Superior demons can even use such crests to control the living.”

“So that means you must have resurrected Mr. Hisui, seeing how he bears the same symbol.”

“As clever as always. The stigma’s physical appearance has two purposes. First, it shows that a person is fated to go to hell upon their death. Second, it serves as a demon’s name tag.”

“A name tag?”

“A demon’s job is to guide any soul they’ve branded down into hell. We engrave our names on those people to claim them as our own. When Hisui passes away, I will be in charge of taking him to hell, though it saddens me just thinking about it.”

Dark shrugged his shoulders. It sounded like a demon could never escape their duties, even if they chose to live as humans.

“From what I saw at the Arabian café, everyone in the Liddell family bears the same rose-shaped stigma. Five people living different lives in different places were all resurrected by the same demon, and now they’re living under the same roof. Don’t you think that’s more than a coincidence?”

“Are you saying that someone gathered us together?”

“I don’t think that’s the right word for it. All of you are being protected here.”

Dark turned around to look down at the garden beneath us.

“You don’t seem to have noticed, but the Liddell estate bears the exact same stigma.”

“It does?”

I leaned against the railing and gazed out at our surroundings. There were no rose-shaped stigmas on the balcony floor, nor on the ceramic flowerpots or the house’s brick walls.

“I’ve never seen a stigma anywhere in this mansion before. Where is it?”

He placed his hands on my shoulders and positioned my body toward the garden.

“Think bigger. What about your beloved roses?”

I looked out once more and gasped.

“There it is...”

The thick greenery of the garden drew out a darkened image under the night sky.

The sprawling labyrinth of hedges formed the flower petals. The brick walkways carved out the leaves and stem. Statues lining the paths were the protruding thorns. Together, they all produced the figure of a rose.

Without a doubt, it was an exact replica of the stigma that Jack and the others bore.

“Minor demons can’t get in, so long as you have this seal. You told me the house was remodeled right after you were born. Perhaps it was the entire garden that was built?”

“That’s right. Father told me he wanted to plant a rose garden that would grow up alongside me. But why does our house need a stigma to...”

I stopped midsentence when a realization hit me.

“...Was it to protect me from other demons?”

On that tragic night, the murderer left a trail of carnage during his search for me.

Hisui even said that I was being targeted by demons.

And then there was the group of shadows that found the Tweedles and me on our way back from the archives. At the time, I assumed they were there to stop us from investigating the Sleeping Beauty cases. But what if they had been waiting for me to leave the mansion so they could have a chance to attack me?

I could hardly believe it, but all the evidence was adding up.

“Your noble, uncorrupted soul would make a fine treat for any demon. The reason your father studied demons was to protect you, and the one who put this stigma here must have taught him what he knew. Perhaps that helpful demon was even like family to the Liddells.”

“Like family...”

Someone’s face flashed in my mind. If a demon really was going out of their way to keep me safe, then it could only be “him.”

“...Dark, can I ask a favor of you?”

“If it’s within my means, I would love to be of service.”

“I want you to take Jack to the Knightley residence. He’s a very heavy sleeper, so you should be able to carry him there.”

Dark was visibly startled by my request. He turned to peer into my bedroom.

"I don't like the sound of carrying a man in my arms as I sail across the sky...but I understand. I'll do it. Now can you tell me what you're planning without him?"

"I lost my family, but I have no intention of keeping silent. Wrongdoers must repent. Wouldn't you agree?"

A smile spread across my face. My heart was pounding with a determination darker than the night, more vivid than blood.

In times like these, I could feel the Liddell family name weighing heavy on my body. I was the only descendant of a long line of nobles who worked in the shadows to ensure the eternal peace of Great Britain.

I would send any fool who harmed my family straight to hell with my own two hands. No matter what it took.

"That's how we Liddells get things done."



DARK left with Jack that night, just as I requested.

The next morning, I ate breakfast alone, dressed myself, and left for town in the afternoon.

My destination was the Silent estate, where I intended to check in on Madeline. Her mother guided me through the house with an unusual spring in her step, and along the way, I caught the scent of soot in the air.

"I couldn't help but notice a strange smell in the house, Madam. May I ask what's going on?"

"A spirit medium arrived here this morning. He told me the Sleeping Beauties weren't awaking because their souls had left their bodies to wander London...or something of the sort. He has to perform a ritual to call her soul back, so we lit candles all throughout the house."

"A ritual...?"

I was reminded of the mediums I knew from my past life.

They were swindlers who persuaded people their illnesses were caused by evil spirits. These mediums could sell you a cure, but of course, their "medicine" was never anything more than water or a hunk of stone. Maybe it worked through placebo effect on

occasion, but that didn't make it the real deal.

It was an obvious scam to anyone thinking clearly, but to a mother whose daughter had fallen into an endless slumber, the medium probably seemed like an angel straight from heaven. I certainly couldn't blame her for being desperate.

We entered Madeline's room, and I saw that the floor was now covered in a mass of candles. Their flames stretched up into the air, thinning the oxygen in the room.

A tall man wearing a clergyman's robe stood at Madeline's bedside, holding a wooden cross in one hand. He looked like he could have come straight from a real church, but the bright pink shawl around his neck told a different story.

"Is there any chance I could assist the medium with his work? I've always wanted to witness a spiritual ritual."

"Very well. Please welcome my daughter home if you're able to bring her back."

"Do you mind, Mr. Medium?"

I stared up at him with a demanding look. The medium, or rather, Leeds in disguise, let out a quiet sigh.

"That will do. Madam, please gather the servants and wait downstairs. Under no circumstances should you come to check on us. Avoid making any loud noises as well. We don't want to scare away Miss Madeline's soul before it can return."

"I understand."

Madame Silent gave a small nod before exiting the bedroom.

When the clacking of her heels was no longer audible in the hallway, I broke the silence in the room.

"I didn't think I'd be seeing you here. That's a nice outfit."

"Heehee. I'm pulling it off, aren't I?"

Leeds held up the fabric of his clergyman's robe and stuck his tongue out playfully. I could see the familiar rose shape of his stigma. He must have used his Liar's Tongue to convince Madame Silent that he was a medium.

"Miss Liddell, what brings you here today? And all alone?"

"I came to see how Miss Madeline was doing, and maybe dig up an important clue along the way, if I'm lucky."

I pulled back the fabric of the bed's lacy canopy. Madeline was still sound asleep, just as she'd been when I visited her the other day, but her cheeks looked much hollower. Her eyes were more sunken too.

"She'll die if she stays like this. We need to find out what put her to sleep..."

"I was just about to ask."

Leeds took hold of Madeline's limp hand and lowered his lips down beside her ear.

"Reveal the truth to me. You will show me the person who put you to sleep."

Madeline's body suddenly went tense.

Her arms, shoulders, and legs all stiffened into frightening poses. She heaved ragged, frantic breaths. It was an extreme reaction, but Leeds paid it no mind and continued his pursuit.

"Place your body in my hands, and the path to heaven will be revealed."

"Ngh!"

She flailed her legs and kicked at the mattress. It felt like I was in my past life again, watching an exorcism scene in a movie.

"Miss Madeline, calm down!"

Leeds's eyes went wide as I reached out to stop her.

"Don't touch her, my lady!"

"Kyah!"

As soon as I made contact, I felt an explosion at my fingertips. The sensation was like static electricity rushing through my body in a wave.

I automatically shut my eyes and was met with a vision of Madeline standing frozen in a dark space, still dressed in her nightgown. A rose crest was spread out on the ground beneath her feet.

The Rose Demon is holding you captive, isn't he?

My question never made it past my lips. The sound of a voice calling out for me pulled me back to reality.

"Miss Alice! Wake up!"

Slowly, I opened my eyes. I had fallen to the ground, but Leeds now had his arms wrapped around me.

Leeds was staring at my face with tears in his eyes. The look he gave me when he abandoned me was gone; his true, kind heart was now shining through, clear as day.

"You can't touch someone I'm using my powers on! Who

knows what that might do! You could have been killed...!”

Leeds was unable to hold back his sobs. I lifted my hand up and placed it gently on his cheek.

“I’m a demon child too, so I’m not as delicate as you think... Leeds?”

“What...?”

“Thank you for calling me ‘Miss Alice’ again.”

I smiled softly at him and felt his arms tighten around me.



“In the end, I just can’t be apart from you. I thought if I came here and found something that could lead to the culprit, then maybe you’d let me come back to the Liddell estate. But I knew that if I used my powers on the victims, they could die...”

Leeds wasn’t just searching for the perpetrator out of the kindness of his heart. He was desperate to regain my love, even if it meant killing the Sleeping Beauties to obtain it.

“I don’t care what lies you tell me, or how badly you deceive me. I don’t even care if you turn your back on me in my last moments. Please, my lady, just allow me to die by your side...”

It wasn’t a pledge to spend our remaining days together in bliss and harmony. Those weren’t the kind of lives we lived.

My heart felt warm upon realizing Leeds felt the same.

“Of course. I’ll never let go of you, be it in life or in death.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

Leeds beamed his happiest smile at me as he helped me up. I sat across from him on the floor and explained what I had just seen.

“Madeline is being held captive by a demon’s crest. It’s the exact same rose that Jack, Dum, Dee, and you all bear.”

“Then the demon who resurrected us must be our culprit. What on earth could his motive be?”

“This whole thing might be about me... All the victims are young women who have connections to Dark. They also hold quite a bit of contempt for me, to the point of bullying. I know that the Rose Demon placed his stigma at the Liddell estate to protect me after my birth, since many demons were after my soul, so I believe he targeted these girls because of their harassment toward me.”

It was my first time talking to anyone about the bullying I’d faced, like those times at the ball and tea party. I was scared it would make me seem weak if anyone knew how it affected me. As the head of my family, that was the last thing I needed.

I always believed I needed to hide my troubles away for the sake of my new family. Only now did I see how wrong I was.

Our bond couldn’t survive on lies and deception. We needed to be true to one another, even if it made things bumpy along the way.

A real family is the people who still want to be by your side, even after you’ve stripped yourself bare to reveal every one of your ugliest truths.

“That must have been so hard for you. Thank you for telling

me, my lady.”

Leeds’s voice was colored with sadness. He pulled me into a hug.

“If that Rose Demon caused all this ruckus just to protect you, well, maybe I’m not so different from him. Demon or human, we all just want to save the ones we love.”

“A demon who loves me...”

It rang true with my theory. I slipped out of his embrace and looked at the bed.

“Leeds, when you were receiving your stigma from that demon, did you happen to see what he looked like?”

“No, I never saw his face. All I could make out from his silhouette were these round, sheep-like horns

“That’s all I needed to know.”

Dark’s horns were long and sharp at the top. They looked like rabbit ears.

But what kind of ears do a sheep’s curled horns look like?

“Before we confront the true culprit, we need to track down Dum and Dee. Leeds, won’t you accompany me to the dueling arena?”

“Of course, but I don’t think you’ll find the little ones there.”

“Why is that?”

Leeds broke into a pained smile, seeing my confusion.

“Those two are much craftier than I am.”



FOR what felt like the millionth time, I was staring up at the same white marble walls.

Leeds and I had arrived at the Knightley residence just as the sun was getting ready to set. The old butler greeted us with a smile and a confusing statement. “We’ve already prepared your dinners for the evening,” he informed us.

Dark always had an impressive amount of foresight, but apparently, so did his butler. Perhaps he had played *Evil Alice’s Lover* as many times as I had...

“By chance, did you ever play an otome game about an evil heroine in your past life?” ...No, I can’t ask him that.

If I did, I’d be casting myself as the total weirdo of the story.

As we walked through the hallway, Leeds whispered into my ear. "Is it just me, or is that butler a little shady? It felt like he knew we were going to show up here."

"The man works for Dark every single day. With a job like that, I'm sure anyone would develop a good sense of intuition."

"Maybe that's all it is. I'd just love to be like him when I'm that age. That way I could be of more use to you, my lady."

"I can't imagine you as an old man, Leeds..."

Leeds was someone who cared deeply about his looks. He would probably be beautiful at any age. I could picture him with gray hair and wrinkles, still living his own unique way of life as neither an "old man" nor an "old woman."

"Well, I hope you're looking forward to it. I'll be the kind of chap you want to show off to the world!"

Leeds flashed me a wink. At that moment, he was more beautiful than I had ever seen him before.



I opened the dining-room door and heard a piercing wail.

"WAAAH!" "WAAAH!"

Objects went sailing across the room with each wail. Finely polished silver utensils, teacups, and even biscuits were being thrown in all directions.

It was the Tweedle twins who were sitting on opposite sides of the room, launching whatever they could get their hands on at each other. Hisui darted back and forth between them, his face full of panic as he tried to console the boys.

Dark...isn't here?

The dining room housed a long table that could seat as many as ten guests. The Knightly family crest was embroidered into an indigo table flag on the wall, and white lilies were carved into the wooden mantelpiece. It was a fine room, but the owner was nowhere to be seen.

I made my way to the back wall, dodging projectiles along the way.

"Maybe he's disguised as a chair?"

The white tablecloth flapped up in the air in response to my wild guess.

“Welcome, Alice. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Dark had been lying prone on the stone floor to avoid the barrage of dinnerware, apparently. Despite the state of the room, he grinned at me.

“See? Our boys are doing just fine.”

“Please don’t make it sound like they’re *our* children. And I would never raise them so *laissez-faire*.”

I took my pistol out of my bag, aimed it toward the ceiling, and pulled the trigger twice. The twins stopped crying when they heard the gunshots. They turned toward me in perfect unison.

“A-...”

“-lice...”

Their faces lit up in joy to see me. They started to call out to me as if nothing had changed, but then their shoulders slumped mid-greeting.

“...What’s the matter?”

The twins looked at me with pained expressions.

“We’re not the same as you, Alice.”

“We were never like you, Alice.”

“Yes you were. The three of us are all humans who have been resurrected by a demon. Even without a stigma, I’m still a ‘stigmata.’”

Jack believed I would ascend to heaven upon my death so long as I didn’t bear a stigma. But that wasn’t how I saw it.

Being resurrected by a demon and cheating death only to end up in heaven would be the ultimate affront to God.

“When I die, I’ll be going to hell just like you two.”

“Really?” “Really?”

Their eyes, still red and puffy from all the tears, stared up at me. I nodded back.

“That’s right. We’ll all be together forever.”

Hearing that, the twins raced up to me and hugged me from each side.

“We don’t hate you, Alice!”

“We were just sad you lied to us, Alice!”

“But you know what?”

“You know what, Alice?”

“We love you so much!” “We love you so much!”

I’d received their immediate forgiveness. I wrapped my arms around their backs and held them close.

"I love you both as well. I'm sorry I kept things from you. Now, what say you two come back to live at the Liddell estate again?"

"Yeah!" "Yeah!"

They pressed their faces into my dress to wipe away their tears.

Dark was mumbling to himself, staring up at us from the floor. "You look like a family of birds nestled together in the winter. I bet it's nice and warm..."

Leeds stared down at him. *What's with this guy?* was written all over his face.

"It's always warm at the Liddell manor, so long as Miss Alice is there."

"You don't have to tell me that. I've experienced it too." Dark crawled out from under the table and grimaced as he took in the state of the room. "I think I'm too impressed to be angry, actually. Hisui, get this cleaned up.

"Understood."

Hisui began to collect the scattered silverware from the floor when a ringing sound drew our attention. Jack was standing in front of the servants' door with a bell in his hand.

"Dinner's here... Hurry up and sit before the soup gets cold."

I had no doubt that Jack was making history as the most unpleasant servant to grace an otome game.

Dark quickly took his seat at the head of the table. Leeds grabbed Dum and Dee by the scruffs of their necks and placed them at the center of the table.

I was last to take my seat and ended up opposite Dark.

Jack placed a spoon on the table in front of me, followed by a bowl of clear soup. The scowl never left his face.

"Are you upset with me, Jack? I sent you here without any warning..."

"I know you had your reasons, but try imagining how I felt when I woke up in bed with him the next morning. I wanted to jump off the balcony."

"Oh my... Dark, you slept next to Jack?"

"It was the only option," he said sadly as he took a sip of wine. "I didn't feel like dragging him to a guest room in the middle of the night, and I couldn't bear to just leave him on the floor. Not to mention, he was crying the whole time."

"No I wasn't."

"Always the tough guy," Dark murmured as Jack glared at him.

Jack had been angry when he first learned that Dark was a demon, but I didn't sense that either of them were in danger now that they lived under the same roof. They almost seemed to be opening up to each other, which was a relief to me.

"You look like you've had a weight lifted off your shoulders, Alice. Did my information prove useful to you?"

"It did. I was able to determine that the culprit behind the Sleeping Beauty cases is none other than the demon who resurrected the five of us. He's been protecting the Liddell estate ever since I was born, and was also the assailant during that tragic night three years ago."

"WHAT?!"

Jack let out a shout and dropped the serving knife from his hand. It hit the floor with a loud clang.

"Jack, you told me that the demon who appeared to save you was led there by the smell of blood," I continued. "But at that point, the Liddell estate was already being protected by a demon's barrier. He was the only one who could have entered the mansion on that night, making him the true culprit."

"That can't be... So the demon that slaughtered everyone was the same demon who saved me?"

I turned my eyes from Jack's shocked face to the Tweedles. They were calmly sipping glasses of juice on either side of Leeds.

"Dum, Dee. Now that we're friends again, would you like to try something different? How would you like to help the Liddell family host a party? We can work on all the preparations together and invite our favorite people. What say the three of us be in charge of the cake, the sweets, and decorations?"

"Let's do it!" "Let's do it!"

The twins lit up in excitement and clapped their hands to their faces. Jack and Leeds exchanged glances and nodded.

"If you're in the mood to party, I'll be here to help."

"You're gonna need a servant, right? I'll help too."

"Thank you. Let's make it a party for the ages. Lord Knightley, I have a favor to ask of you as well. The Liddell estate isn't suited for a party, what with all the traps throughout the grounds. Would you allow us to host it here at your home?"

“But of course. You can use the Hall of Mirrors where I held my ball. I was planning on renovating it anyway, so feel free to decorate it to your heart’s content.”

“I appreciate it, and I’d like to show my gratitude. Will you accept me as your fiancée?”

I let it slip out casually. Dark clearly hadn’t expected my proposal. His eyes went wide and he gulped down the champagne that was in his mouth.

“Wait, do you really mean that?”

“My lady, that’s not funny!”

“He’s right. Don’t rush into it, my lady.”

“It’s not a joke, and I’m not rushing into it. I’ve given it a lot of thought.”

I cut my family members off before they could further object. This was the greatest gamble of my entire life.

“You wish to marry me, right, Dark? I’ll agree to it, so long as you promise me something. I don’t want you laying a hand on the perpetrator of the Sleeping Beauty cases. If you get in my way, I’ll have to shoot you.”

Under the table, I placed my hand inside the heart-shaped bag that contained my pistol. This stipulation seemed to help Dark sense my resolve, and he agreed to my demand.

“I can tell that you mean it. Is there anything else I can help with?”

“I need you to teach me how to kill a demon.”

Everyone in the room gulped when they heard me.

“Right now, that’s the greatest challenge I face.”

Final Chapter: Alice's Stigma

THE Liddell family invites you to a midnight tea party hosted inside the Right Honorable Earl Knightley's Hall of Mirrors.

Our whole family is eager to greet you, so we hope to see you there.

*With love,
Alice Liddell*

I had just written the first formal invitation of my life. Hisui was in charge of delivering the invites while I focused on putting together an outfit.

The guest room I was given had a calming atmosphere, complete with rose-pink curtains and matching carpet. A young maid who looked to be about my age was helping me get dressed.

"Your Ladyship, all these pieces are yours to choose from."

"Oh my...!"

She showed me to the walk-in closet, where I was met with a breathtaking sight. The small room was lined with metal rods that held a surprising number of brightly colored dresses.

Each one had been procured by Dark just for me. He told me I would need an appropriate outfit if I was to take on the role of party host.

From beautiful turquoise tiered dresses to flared skirts lined with vivid green flowers, and even bustles speckled with pink flowers across the fabric. Each dress was made with finely tailored designs and gorgeous colors that caught the eye.

I couldn't believe Dark had managed to gather so many dresses in such a short period of time. I scanned each piece with my eyes and stopped at the very back of the closet.

From behind a voluminous red dress, I caught a glimpse of dark tulle lace. I pulled it out to reveal a jet-black dress studded with pearls of varying size.

"It's beautiful."

I was taken with it at first sight, but the maid's expression

stiffened just a little.

“My lady, might I suggest a brighter color, more fitting for a young woman of your age?”

“This is the one I want. Will you help me put it on?”

“Of course, my lady.”

She tightened my corset and helped me into the dress. Once it was properly settled around my body, I could see that both the length and size were the perfect fit for me.

I sat down at the vanity and began to put on my gloves when I heard a quiet knock from the other end of the room. The maid rushed to the door and sounded surprised to see the person on the other side.

“Her Ladyship is not finished dressing yet!”

“Then I’ll come back later.”

I managed to overhear his familiar voice, so I leaned toward the door and called out to him. “All I’m missing is my choker. You can come in, Dark.”

He entered the room and broke out into a fond smile when he laid eyes on my outfit. “I see you’ve chosen a black dress. Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

“Is there a more fitting color for someone who works from the shadows?”

“It’s not just about your work. It suits you as a person too. You look beautiful.”

Dark placed a circular red box on my lap.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a present. Open it up and see.”

I untied the ribbon and lifted the lid to reveal a bow-shaped headdress tucked inside. The fabric had been folded over many times to form a beautiful array of hanging drapes.

It was a lovely shape, but I was particularly taken with the color. The fabric was the same shade of black as my dress.

“Dark, did you know I would choose a black dress?”

“You think I wouldn’t be well acquainted with the tastes of my favorite young lady? I’m still an English gentleman, after all.”

He lifted the headdress from the box, fastened it into my hair, and smoothed the strands down with his fingers. I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

The ribbons on my head, the low-cut dress around my body, my lacy gloves, and even the jeweled heels on my feet were all the

same color of black. My red hair was as vivid as poison, and my crimson eyes burned with a thirst for revenge.

I was clad in the colors of blood and shadow. It was a fitting palette for the head of the Liddell family.

There was only one thing in the mirror that didn't look right. It was the man standing behind me.

"...When we first met, I could tell how different the two of us are. I don't think anything's changed in that regard."

"You're feeling quite sentimental today, aren't you?" he said with a laugh from behind me, despite my gloomy tone. "I'd agree that I'm not like you. I'm the crescent moon that hangs above us in the night sky, and you're the queen of darkness. You would never be within reach of an ordinary man like myself."

"You're the moon, and I'm the darkness?"

Dark took my choker from the maid and brushed my hair over my right shoulder. I felt the black strip of fabric wrap around my slim neck.

"That's right. The moon sinks out of the sky every night, and it's constantly being erased by the light of the sun. Yet still, darkness can never coexist with light. By definition, it is an endless sea of black in all directions. Such darkness can only be bound by those limitations forever, or be erased by the light... Just thinking about it makes me shudder."

"You don't seem very scared to me."

"Perhaps awe is the right word. It's a fascination so strong, it inspires fear in the beholder."

As he tied the strings into a bow, I caught a glimpse of his pained expression in the mirror.

"The moon is inseparable from the darkness. Don't forget that no matter what happens, I will be by your side."

Dark gently kissed the choker against my neck. I closed my eyes as I felt the faint warmth of his lips.

I still didn't know if I was making the right choice.

All I could hope was that our relationship remained unchanged by the time the morning arrived.



IT was eleven-thirty in the evening when Dark escorted me into the

Hall of Mirrors.

A long table was set out in the room, draped in a white cloth and surrounded by eight chairs.

The serving trays were packed with golden scones and chocolate treats cut into the shape of diamonds. Bright, vivid-colored cakes sat atop a three-tiered display.

Chains made of colorful paper lined the walls of mirrors, with bouquets of roses placed under each chain. Shiny ropes adorned the backs of the chairs.

The twins were seated on the ground. When they spotted me, they held up their scissors and glue.

“Alice! Isn’t it cute in here?!” they cried together.

“Yes, it looks lovely.”

The solemn room had been given a steep upgrade of charm thanks to their decorations. Even Dark didn’t hesitate to sing their praises.

“This is just wonderful! Why, the best architects in all of Great Britain couldn’t create such a fine room!”

“They like it!” “They like it!”

Despite the late hour, the two boys were full of energy thanks to an afternoon nap.

Hisui had returned from delivering the invitations. He was curled up with a garbage bin for a pillow, trying to fall asleep.

Jack, with his butler’s uniform askew as always, sat at the table. He was clearly nervous, drawing his sword in and out of the sheath repeatedly. Leeds remained on his feet and chose to focus on fixing the decorations that were starting to come undone.

“Can you all come here for a moment?”

Leeds and the Tweedles approached me in response.

“Alice, we were wondering...” “Alice, we were wondering...”

“Who’s this big guest tonight?” Leeds finished their sentence.

“A very special person. I don’t know what’s going to happen, so let’s not forget our Liddell family customs.”

I patted the twins’ heads. They were unconsciously reaching for the weapons under their jackets. Their deeply ingrained combat instincts would surely be of use to them.

“I don’t want you to forget—no matter who we may face, and no matter what truth comes out tonight, we’re still a family.”

“Of course, our dear Alice.” “Of course, our dear Alice.”

I stuck my pinkie out and the Tweedles wrapped their fingers

around mine.

Leeds placed his hand on top of ours. He was looking at me meekly.

“No matter what comes our way, I’ll never leave your side, my lady.”

But one hand wasn’t joining ours, no matter how long we waited.

“Jack?”

I turned to see that Jack was side-eyeing us gloomily from his seat.

“...I still don’t believe it, my lady. To think that the Rose Demon who resurrected us killed all those people...”

“You don’t have to agree with me. I’ll let you decide who ends up on the other end of your blade.”

That was enough to convince him. He rose sluggishly from the chair and placed his hand on top of ours.

Feeling the weight of the four of them, I decided to do something shameless for a girl who owed her life to a demon. I began to pray.

Please, God. Just for tonight, let us receive your blessings.

They pressed their hands down together and let out the same cheer.

“Anything for Alice!”

With that, the party was ready to begin.



THE clock struck midnight with a loud chime. When the last tone finished ringing, we heard the doors to the hallway open up.

“Well, isn’t this a sight!”

The man led inside by the butler was none other than Bear.

He wore a stylish Italian suit and an ascot instead of the chef’s outfit we were used to seeing him in. As always, his hair was twisted into what resembled a pair of bear’s ears on his head.

“Bear!” “Bear!”

The twins ran in his direction as soon as they spotted our guest.

I held up my dress and curtsied in greeting.

“We’ve been expecting you, Uncle Bear.”

He stepped toward me with a grin spread across his face.

"Alice, I almost didn't recognize the beautiful woman in front of me. I was so worried when I heard that Leeds and the Tweedles wouldn't be coming home, but now I see they were busy puttin' all this together!"

"Indeed. It was our first time organizing a party on our own, so it took up quite a bit of time. Allow me to show you in."

I accepted the bouquet he carried and glanced at Leeds.

"Bear, please have a seat. We've set out a chair just for you."

Leeds led him to the table where the twins had scrawled out a name tag that read Guest of Honor! Bear lowered his large body into his seat, which positioned him directly opposite from the head chair normally used by Dark.

Jack poured his cup full of hot black tea. I placed the bouquet on the side of the table, approached the head of the table, and gestured toward Dark, who was standing against the wall.

"Uncle Bear, before we begin the party, there's something I'd like to tell you."

"Oh? What surprise is it this time?"

Bear looked at me excitedly. I intentionally placed my hand on Dark's arm for him to see.

"As of yesterday, I am engaged to be married. This is my fiancé, the earl Dark Arland Knightley."

The mood in the room turned cold as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Bear's eyes went so wide, I thought they might fall out of his head.

"You're...engaged...?"

Dark tipped his hat. It was tall and white like a shortcake.

"Please accept my apologies for the sudden announcement. As you are a member of her family, we wanted you to be first to—"

"I won't allow this!"

Bear slammed his fist on the table, cutting off Dark.

The impact sent the cutlery Jack had laid out scattering all over the table.

"The girl... Alice is the head of the Liddell family! I'll never let her end up a Knightley!"

"If the family name is so important to you, perhaps you could take over the title of baron? I give you my word that Alice will be happy as my wife. I care about her more than anyone in the world."

"More than anyone? That's not possible. No one cares about

Alice more than I do!”

Bear leaped out of his chair and sent it tumbling down behind him.

His body began to blur as if I were staring at him through an unfocused lens—but it wasn’t that he was actually blurring. His body was bulging and expanding to make him bigger and bigger.

It was surely an unbelievable sight to anyone who thought Bear was human, but I remained calm.

I knew he’d reveal his true self if I told him this—that I’m marrying and moving to a new home.

I was standing before the demon who had branded the Liddell estate with his stigma in order to protect “Alice.” It took the shock of a lifetime for him to finally let the human façade slip.

Dark and I agreed on a fictional engagement to produce just that shock.

The twins stared up at Bear in amazement. They were still clinging to his sides.

“Bear...?” “Bear...?”

“Get over here, boys!”

Jack clicked his tongue and snatched Dum away. Hisui picked up Dee, and the two of them leaped to the other side of the room. By that point, Bear had finished transforming into a frightening sight.

His body was three times larger than before. His skin was dark red like blood, and the surface of his brow and chin had started to jut out.

Bear’s knuckles were bony, his claws sharp and pointed, and his large horns curled around his head, just like a sheep’s.

He looked just as he did on the night of the tragedy, but this time, he couldn’t keep his horns hidden.

It was the true form of Bear—the Rose Demon.



"I see you were a demon this whole time, Uncle Bear. What was the purpose of posing as a human?"

"I was protecting you, Alice."

"That's quite a stunning excuse. I don't recall asking you to put any girls into eternal slumbers."

I glanced around at the colorfully decorated Hall of Mirrors.

"I heard you attended the same ball I did, right here in this room. Dark remembered sending an invitation to the famous philanthropist 'Bernard Liddell.' Did you decide to put Madeline to sleep when you heard the things she said about me?"

"That's right. That arrogant little girl thought she could make a fool of my Alice. They all deserve the same fate! I could have just killed them right then and there, but instead I put them into a painless sleep, where they'll die little by little, slowly but surely! You should be thanking me!"

Bear didn't show an ounce of remorse over what he'd done.

I approached him with my gun drawn and hidden behind my back.

"You sent those shadows out to the archives to prevent me from finding out you were adopted. The Liddells took you in sixteen years ago, immediately after my birth, and you branded our home with your stigma to protect me, didn't you? Thank you, Uncle Bear."

"So you know about that, Alice?!"

He threw his arms up in joy. At his feet, the rose crest of his stigma began to form on the ground.

"I served the Liddells for so many years. I had to make sure the mansion was protected so that no other demons came after you. They even taught me how to hide my horns. I did it all for my beloved family!"

"Your beloved family? But they're all gone because of you!"

I knew I needed to stay calm, but my demeanor changed in an instant.

"The demon who protected the Liddells wouldn't allow such a bloodbath to go unanswered. You couldn't save me from the intruder that night either, but then again, how could you? The one who circled the mansion and killed off my entire family was you. Uncle Bear, you were the culprit behind that tragedy from three years ago!"

"You've figured it all out... You're such a wonderful girl, Alice."

"Answer me. Why did you kill my family?"

"Because...they broke my heart."

It was a surprisingly human response. Bear's eyes looked dark and empty as he spoke.

"When you turned thirteen, I went to my brother—your father—and asked for permission to marry you. But he told me he would never allow his beloved daughter to become the bride of a demon. I lost all hope and was filled with regret over protecting your home with my stigma for so long. I hated your family, but in the end, I couldn't stop loving you. It nearly drove me mad. And after all the suffering I endured, I finally came up with a fantastic idea!"

Bear's mouth drew upward into a smirk. It was a maniacal expression formed by his bulging face.

"I care about the Liddell family, but the current members are in my way, so I'll destroy them and build a new family with Alice!"

"That was why you...?"

I didn't understand his logic. Perhaps my human heart was getting in the way.

"If you wanted the two of us to make a family, then why did you resurrect Jack?"

If I was the only one who came back to life, then Bear and I would be the only members of the Liddell family, just like he wanted. Yet he saved four other lives aside from my own.

"You resurrected Dum, Dee, and Leeds as well. Then you introduced them to me, and even cooked us all those wonderful meals. You were kind to all of them—not just me. Why did you do all that?"

Even knowing he was a demon now, my memories of the days I spent with him were still happy ones.

It was a scrap of hope for me to cling to, but Bear just looked at me with confusion in his eyes.

"Jack's a hard worker. We needed someone like that to serve our family. Leeds is a kind boy who will take care of our family and never expect anything in return. Dum and Dee are tough kids. They have what it takes to protect us. I kept them all close to you because they would benefit the Liddell family. That's all it was."

It was almost like hearing a list of love interests being added to an otome game.

“...We’re not just *characters* put here to satisfy your desires...”

I held up the gun in front of me and aimed it straight at Bear.

“I’ll never forgive you for killing Mother, Father, and all our servants. It’s time for your repentance!”

I pulled the trigger. The gun let out a roar, and in the same instant, a large hole opened up in Bear’s head.

Despite the impact, he didn’t appear to be in any pain. Bear pressed his hand to his forehead with a look of shock on his face and dug out the bullet with his sharp claws.

“Alice... Why did you shoot me?”

“You’re our current target, Uncle Bear.”

I reached into my bag and removed an envelope sealed with red wax—his obituary.

I tossed it in Bear’s direction. The envelope fluttered through the air and landed at his feet.

“The Liddells work among the shadows to preserve the peace of this kingdom. Each generation before me has eliminated sinners from this world, and it’s my job to follow in their footsteps.”

Bear opened the obituary and shuddered when he laid eyes upon his own name. He crushed the bullet between his fingers, covered his eyes, and quietly began shedding tears.

“I thought I’d finally, finally created the perfect family! This is all your fault, you damned demon! You got in Alice’s way!”

He lifted up his chair like it weighed nothing and sent it flying at Dark, who was watching us from the side.

The chair approached him at such speed, all he could do was watch, his blue eyes wide open, as it drew near.

“Dark, move!”

It was too late. The chair struck Dark and splintered into a thousand pieces.

“Dark!”

“...You needn’t worry.”

With those words, the wooden pieces went scattering back in the opposite direction. They’d met with a hovering barrier that bore the shape of a crescent moon. Dark was using his stigma as a shield to protect his body.

Two long horns sprouted up from his head, forming the shape of rabbit ears.

“You call me ‘demon’ as an insult, and yet, you yourself are the most wicked demon of them all. Thank you for telling such an

amusing joke, *Uncle Bear*.”

Bear heaved ragged, angry breaths in response to Dark’s provocations.

“Knightley... I know all about your father, you know. He was a foolish human who sought an heir to his title by any means necessary, even if it meant summoning a demon to be his ‘son.’ He would’ve been better off stealing someone else’s kid.”

“...I’ve grown tired of listening to your thoughtless drivel. Alice, finish this up before I lose my patience.”

Dark crossed his arms. I took that as a sign that he would keep his promise to me.

“Step back, my lady.”

Jack moved in front of me with an intense glare on his face.

He thrust the tip of his sword at Bear. It was exactly how I remembered him on the night of the tragedy.

“You lied to me. Your kindness was all just a trick!”

“Such a fool you are, Jack. If I hadn’t said what I did, you wouldn’t have joined our new family, would you?”

“Of course not. I’d rather have died that night than spend these three years playing house with the demon who destroyed the Liddell family. I hate how blind I was. I hate you, and I hate myself for accepting your stigma. I should just burn it all away!”

Fire shot out of Jack’s hands. The flames engulfed his entire body; even the iron of his sword turned bright red.

Hisui began to provide enough water to prevent the fire from spreading, but it was too late for the tablecloth. The flames rose higher and even caught the chains of colored paper that decorated the walls. I gulped at the unexpected sight.

His flames are only supposed to destroy the object of his hatred!

The fire was even burning Jack’s clothes. The seal on his powers had been broken.

“Jack, you mustn’t let yourself burn too!”

“Quiet! I’ll take him down with me!”

Jack charged at Bear before I could stop him. He slashed his sword at Bear, but just as the blade was about to reach his stomach, Bear swiftly grabbed it with his hands.

“How dare you turn your sword on your parent...! I don’t need you anymore.”

Bear squeezed the blade with all his might, and it began to

curl like a leaf in the wind under his fingers. Jack dropped his sword in shock, and then Bear lifted him up by the neck.

“Argh!”

Jack groaned as Bear’s grip tightened. Finally accepting that Bear was the enemy, the Tweedle brothers took hold of their daggers and crossbow. The pair sprang into action.

“Let go of Jack!” “Let go of Jack!”

The impact of the arrow and the plunge of the daggers were nothing to Bear. He brushed them off as if they were pesky insects, then leaped up onto the table, still with Jack’s neck in his grip. He fought off the attempted attacks with his free hand.

“Hahaha. It’s too late, my adorable little boys! Demon children can never defeat the one who gave them life!”

“May I interject?”

Leeds swapped places with the twins and whipped his chain belt around Bear’s neck. He jumped from the table, using his whole body to weigh down the chain.

It was enough power to sever the head of any normal human, but Bear withstood it. He let go of Jack, grabbed hold of the chain, and swung it as hard as he could.

“Ngh!”

Leeds would have crashed into the ceiling, but he let go of the chain and grabbed hold of Jack, and the four boys tumbled below the table at the same time.

We were outdone, and all I could do was grit my teeth.

Our attacks were nothing more than child’s play to Bear.

But...there’s no other way...

On the night of our dinner, I had asked Dark how to kill a demon.

“I’ve never heard of a way. Even the Church of England can only exorcise demons—not kill them.”

“I don’t care by what means. I only want to know if it’s possible.”

I persisted anyway. Dark had set his champagne glass on the table and folded his hands together.

“If the demon becomes too weak to fight back, I can brand him with my stigma and seal him away in hell... But you’re a compassionate bunch. Are you sure you can go through with this?”

There’s no question about it. This is the only choice we have!

I knew we never stood a chance of defeating Bear.

But we had to be the ones to take him down. If we didn't, we would never escape the curse of the rose and reclaim our lives.

I need a way to overpower him.

I was looking all over the room for something I could use when I spotted Dark pointing toward the ceiling.

Above me?

I lifted my head and noticed a large crystal chandelier.

It was suspended by a chain slick with rust-preventing oil that had caught fire from Jack's flames.

The chain was already red and partially melted. As soon as I saw it, I shouted as quickly as I could. "Everyone, head for the mirrors!"

The four boys scattered toward the mirrored walls at my command.

"Are we done fooling around now, children?"

Bear's laughter echoed in my ears as I aimed my gun at the chandelier and fired.

The bullet let out a loud clang as it bounced off the melting chain.

With that, the golden wire snapped, sending the heavy chandelier tumbling down...

Exactly where Bear stood.

"Ah...?"

Just as he lifted his head to catch a glimpse of what I'd done, the massive structure crushed him into the ground.

"AHHHHHHH!"

Bear's scream pierced the room. I could hear the horrible cracking of his bones as the chandelier hit the ground.

Loose crystals scattered across the floor around him.

It's just like how Jack and I died.

The emotional memory flooded my mind as I watched Bear writhe in agony.

Demons cannot die. They can only suffer. But as I looked at the dreadful sight before me, I realized that death was an escape he didn't deserve.

"I think it's my turn now."

At the snap of his fingers, Dark produced his crescent moon seal on the floor beneath the chandelier. He stood over the white light and smirked down at Bear victoriously.

"I had a lovely time at the party, Bernard the Demon. Think of this chandelier as your parting gift for the evening. I hope you have fun playing house in hell...because you'll never have another soul to play with again."

He raised his arms like the conductor of an orchestra, and the floor under Bear began to ripple as if it were a pool of water. A dark blue galaxy unfolded beneath him.

The table and the remnants of the chandelier drained into the floor, one by one.

Bear, covered in dust and glass, shook his arms and legs in an attempt to resist.

"No! Don't leave me all alone! Alice, save me!"

"May we meet again in the depths of hell. Farewell, Uncle Bear."

I picked up the obituary and held it out to him. Bear's face twisted as he clasped the envelope in his hand.

"In your other life..."

"Huh?"

"I was so happy...when you *saved me* from that car..."

The floor swallowed up Bear's body and face. The final trace of the man, the tip of his twisted braid, sank into the ground with a quiet splash.

Dark clenched his fist, and the galaxy was shut away.

The light disappeared after it finished consuming everything.

"The car... That means that Uncle Bear..."

He had to be the kitten I saved in my previous life. Maybe he even saw me reading about *Evil Alice's Fiancé* with a smile on my face and caused me to be reborn into my beloved otome game world.

Could it have been his way of thanking me?

I slumped to the floor.

"...It's over..."

"Alice, it's Jack!" "Alice, it's Jack!"

The twins' voices snapped me back to reality. Jack was burning up against the mirrored wall.

Hisui attempted to douse him with water, but it was no use.

"Your guard dog's intense hatred appears to be setting off his stigma."

Dark watched the scene unfold with his hand against his chin

in consideration. Flustered, I pressed him for answers.

“The stigmas don’t disappear, even after defeating the demon they belonged to?”

“No, they don’t. A sin can never be erased.”

“Then how do we stop his power...?”

“If anyone can help him, it’s you.”

Dark’s sapphire eyes gleamed in a strange way. He placed his fingers against my chin.

“Fortunately, you never received a stigma from Bernard. That means I can give you mine. Tell me, right now, what is it you most desire?”

“I need to erase his powers!”

I answered without the slightest hesitation. Dark’s face lit up in delight.

“This is a spell I’ve been waiting to cast.”

Dark wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a kiss.

“!”

His lips lit my heart on fire the moment they fell upon mine.

Heat rose up inside my body and flung open the door in my chest that had always been closed. I felt myself filled with a love that was warm and sweet, like hot milk and honey.

My lungs ached from the lack of air, but I felt so complete at that moment, I nearly cried.

Is this what it feels like to be captured by a demon?



I would never be alone, not so long as I was bound to Dark. He was going to watch over me until my next death—the day I descended into hell.

I had no idea a demon's stigma could be such a beautiful curse...

"Look, Alice."

Once he broke the kiss, I felt an intense heat ripple through the center of my chest. I clutched at the source of the pain.

"It burns...!"

"You mustn't look away. This is your 'stigma.'"

I let my hand fall away to reveal the crescent moon seal hovering over my skin.

Now that I was a stigmata, there was only one desire in my heart.

"Jack!"

I dashed toward him, holding my dress up with both hands. My shoes slipped off along the way, and I felt the crystals on the ground cut my bare feet. The floor turned red with my blood, but I never slowed for a second.

Reaching the wall of mirrors, I stretched my arms beyond Jack and the flames to embrace them both.

"Please, make it stop!"

My stigma cast out white rays of light as I made my wish. Its beams folded and weaved over each other to form a protective cocoon around Jack, then suddenly burst all at once like a supernova.

When the light subsided enough for me to open my eyes, I could see no traces of the flames that had just been burning.

"They're gone..."

I peered down at Jack, who was slumped in my arms.

"Jack?"

His face was smeared with soot, but I could hear the gentle sound of him inhaling and exhaling. His face was innocent and childlike as he slept. His limbs showed no signs of burns, despite the singed state of his clothes.

"Is he alive?" "Is he alive?"

Dum and Dee crept toward us nervously. Leeds pressed his fingers against Jack's wrist.

"His pulse is a bit fast, but he's alive. Are you all right, my

lady?”

“I’m fine. Jack really went too far this time. I’ll have to scold him when he wakes up.”

Those weren’t the only words he would hear from me.

I’m strong enough to protect you now, just as you’ve always protected me.

Even with a stigma branded on my soul and hell now awaiting my arrival, there was nothing to fear, so long as I had my family.

Epilogue

I took steady breaths and held my hands over the bed where Madeline slept.

“Please let her awaken from her slumber.”

My words caused white beams of light to pour out of the stigma on my chest and wrap around my fingers. When I stroked Madeline’s eyelids, droplets of light fell and sparkled on her skin like eyeshadow.

It wasn’t long before the girl opened her eyes.

“Who...are you?”

All I could do was smile awkwardly at her half-awake state of mind. She didn’t remember me at the moment, but the rumors she spread about me almost doomed her to a fate of eternal slumber. Words come back to haunt you in mysterious ways.

“Madeline!”

Madame Silent burst into tears and wrapped her arms around her frail daughter.

I quietly stepped away from their bed to give the family some time together.



“I’VE managed to wake every one of the Sleeping Beauties. It’s all thanks to the power of the stigma you gave me.”

A short-statured maid led us down the wide palace halls.

The afternoon sunlight pooled under our feet. It carried the warmth of early summer in its rays.

The sleeves and collar of my black dress were made of tulle lace, which made the whole thing as light as a feather.

Dark was walking alongside me, also wearing a lightweight, linen ditto suit. His outfit was covered in vibrant flowers, even up to the hat. I felt like I was standing beside a flower basket.

“It’s not thanks to me. The incredible feat was yours alone. You wished for the unusual ability to ‘erase powers’ when I branded

you with my stigma.”

“There was nothing ‘incredible’ about it. It was all I could do, since a demon child’s stigma can’t be entirely erased...”

No matter how many times I tried, I couldn’t use my power to erase the stigma that Jack, Dum, Dee, and Leeds were branded with. They were still captive to the Rose Demon, and as sinners who once managed to cheat death, all they could do was live out the rest of their lives before their eventual descent into hell.

The maid led us outside to a small hill as Dark and I conversed.

The grass was covered in golden poppies and white daisies. Asiatic dayflowers swayed in the breeze, tucked under the shadow of a tree. It was a beautiful, lush patch of nature.

A large garden parasol was set up on top of the hill. Beneath it, a woman sat alone at a table, reading a letter.

She calmly gazed at the paper—the very picture of a distinguished older woman. Pinned to the chest of her striped summer dress was a mourning brooch made of jet and worn in memory of her late husband.

The maid whispered something into the woman’s ear, and she finally looked up at us.

“Heavens, what unusual visitors.”

“Your Majesty, Queen Victoria, it is an honor to be in your presence.”

I held up my skirt and curtsied to her. It was the normal custom when greeting someone of the highest possible status.

On the other hand, Dark tipped his hat toward her casually, as if he were passing by a friend on the street.

“Good to see you, Vicky. You look as lovely as ever.”

“Dark! You’re being far too familiar with Her Majesty.”

I shot a glare in his direction. I had no doubt that the Queen would be just as angry with him, but for some reason, her hands were clutching her cheeks in delight.

“Why, if it isn’t Alice and Little Dark! Aren’t you two just the sweetest guests? What a delight!”

“L-Little...Dark?”

“She’s grown bored of her life in the palace, so we have this silly game we play,” Dark whispered in my ear as I stood there in shock. “The rules are that as long as we stand on this hill, we must speak to each other as equals. If I don’t call her by a nickname, she

bestows a wretched title upon my name. The worst one I bore was 'Little Dark the Pervert.'"

"How cruel... Are the two of you perhaps children in disguise?"

I cringed inwardly as Her Majesty sent the maid off to bring us chairs and tea.

"Your timing is perfect. I was just reading the summary Little Dark sent me about the Sleeping Beauty cases."

It seemed the paper on her table was from Dark.

The chairs arrived and we took our seats. Nervously, I spoke.

"Your Majesty, the culprit in this case has been entombed in the darkness. Lord Knightley assisted us, but in the end, it was solved by the Liddell family."

"That's what I heard. And along the way, you two became engaged, is that right? I just adored the part where you kissed Little Dark to receive his stigma, Alice!"

The Queen squirmed in delight like a girl who'd just seen a new CG of her bias.

It reminded me a little too much of me in my past life. I suddenly had a bad feeling about the situation.

"It sounds like there are some discrepancies in Dark's retelling of the case... May I have a look at his letter?"

"By all means! It's a real masterpiece of a story, so I'd really hoped to share it with someone!"

"Oh my...!"

I thought I was going to faint when I laid eyes on the letter.

It started out as a retelling of how we solved the Sleeping Beauty cases. Then along the way, it turned into the story of the romance between Dark and me. It read like something right out of an otome game.

"Dark, what's the meaning of this?!"

"I'm glad you asked. You see, I'm more than just a handsome face. My literary skills took hold of me as I wrote my report, and I ended up turning out something of an epic tale. But don't worry, as none of it has been fictionalized. Our first meeting, our competition, my involvement in the investigation, and how we cozied up to each other in the end is all there. I just embellished it a little."

"Embellished? You call this embellishment?!"

I grabbed Dark by the collar and used my other hand to thrust the letter in front of him.

“You didn’t say anything about how you tricked me into our first kiss with a stupid child’s prank! ‘Having fallen for each other at first sight, the two of us pressed our lips together in a passionate display of desire...’ This is totally made up!”

“Calm down, Alice. Vicky seemed quite taken with my work. Isn’t that right?”

He grinned in her direction and the Queen gave him a thumbs-up.

“It was a riveting tale, my little Dark. Have you thought about selling it as a book? Oh, but more importantly, there’s the wedding to think about! What kind of dress will you be wearing?”

It seemed there had been a grave misunderstanding. I let go of Dark and fired back with the truth.

“Your Majesty, our engagement was only a trap we laid to reveal the culprit. It wasn’t for real!”

“Don’t be shy, Alice. I know how dangerous situations often bring men and women together. The heart-racing thrill you get when working on the case turns into a true bond of love... It’s just so exhilarating!”

“Here’s something even more exhilarating, Vicky. You see how passionate Alice is? When she pledged her body to me, the look on her face was so sweet as she begged me to proceed, I couldn’t hold back. It was her first time, so I tried my best to be gentle, but I still fear I was too rough with her.”

“Dark, you’re making it sound weird! You only branded me with your stigma!”

Her Majesty swayed from side to side as the two of us bickered.

“Ahhh, couples are so cute when they argue! I want to show the maids too. I’ll be right back once I gather some people~!”

“Huh?! Your Majesty, please wait just a moment!”

She ignored my pleas and skipped down the hill away from us.

There was no doubt in my mind that the rumor of our engagement would soon be spread. It didn’t take long for gossip to make its way through high society, especially if it came from the royal palace.

“I can’t believe this... It’s all your fault!”

I held my head in my hands while Dark cheerfully asked, “What’s the matter? We still formed a contract, in the sense that you pledged your soul to me when you accepted my stigma. It’s not

so different from a marriage engagement. But in truth, I never wanted that bond to be a part of our relationship. Bernard must not have branded you because he felt the same way...”

“But if he did, wouldn’t we be bound together forever?”

Dark stared at me warmly in response to my confusion. “He probably wanted you to fall for him of your own free will.”

“My free will...”

It was such an unexpected response, I went speechless. Bear wanted me to love him for him. His stigma would make me belong to him in an instant, but he didn’t want to steal my heart.

He was truly a demon in love.

“...What a foolish man.”

I’d loved Bear as a member of my family, so that was all I could say.

Dark took a sip of black tea and changed the subject. “Let’s talk about us. If we have the approval of Vicky, the Queen, then I don’t think any nobles can oppose us. When would you like to formally announce it?”

“We’ll be doing no such thing. I only proposed to you because I had no other choice!”

“You’re so stubborn. Why can’t you just go with the flow? I promise I’ll make you happy.”

“No thank you. I still have things to do as a Liddell.”

I’d already accepted that I was clearly in the middle of Dark’s route. The problem was that the Sleeping Beauty cases were only one small chapter in a larger story. Otome games are always rich in content like that.

If I continued to proceed in my romance with Dark, the life of “Alice” would keep being put in danger.

I also needed to find people who could protect the Liddell estate now that our guardian demon was gone. There was no time to busy myself with becoming Dark’s wife. I probably hadn’t reached the right point in the story yet.

“I am Alice, the head of the Liddell family. If I want happiness, I’ll obtain it with my own two hands. Now revoke our engagement at once!”

I retrieved the pistol from my bag and pointed it at Dark, who smiled back at me pleasantly.

“I think you might regret that. You love me a lot more than you let on.”

“I don’t remember saying anything of the sort.”

“You kissed me when I branded you with my stigma. That’s how I know.”

I turned bright red when he brought that up so casually.

“Y-You can’t read my mind! That’s just unfair!”

“Hahaha! Some might even call it ‘devilish,’ no?”

Dark’s stupid joke only made me angrier. I waved my gun at him and shouted: “Give up already! You’ll never get the words *I love you* out of me!”

Summer was just around the corner. The sequel to my love story, set in the otome world’s “Deadliest Game of the Year,” would remain a secret for a little while longer.

Afterword

IT'S nice to meet you. My name is Chii Kurusu.

Thank you very much for purchasing *I Reincarnated As Evil Alice, So the Only Thing I'm Courting Is Death!*

This story is heavily influenced by Lewis Carroll's novels *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. I was a young girl when I first read these two books, and I quickly became hooked on the world crafted from chess and playing cards, as well as the rich wordplay throughout the story. Even now, when I read them again as an adult, I still love these books with all my heart.

After I decided to take on the popular "evil heroine" trope for this story, I was trying to come up with ways to make my version unique, and I finally landed on using my beloved *Alice* books as a motif. Different versions of Alice, Jack, the Tweedle brothers, and the Mad Hatter all appear as characters in this story. There are other references that appear in my writing too, like the pool of tears, mirrors, and people growing larger. I even ended up writing tea party scenes twice since they're just so much fun. I love how the table gets turned into such a mess.

If you have any favorite scenes, I'd love to hear what you thought of them. I'll be waiting for your reviews!

A girl is reborn as the heroine of an otome game. She encounters perplexing events and even death flags but learns to grow as she discovers her changing feelings and role in the story.

Even though she's surrounded by pursuable characters, she's able to find her strength when she realizes there's only one man she truly loves. This is the tale of "Evil Alice." As the author, I'd be thrilled if you enjoyed experiencing this story alongside her.

I offer my sincerest gratitude to everyone who participated in translating this book.

Finally, I'd like to give you, the reader, my utmost thanks for making it this far!

Chii Kurusu



cross infinite world



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I REJECT THESE
HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!**

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
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PRINCESS DREAMS OF
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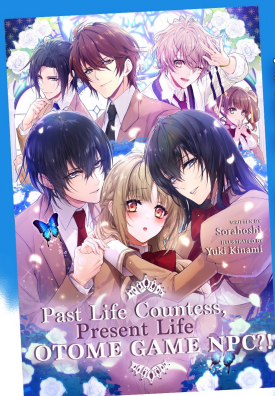
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PAST LIFE COUNTESS, PRESENT LIFE OTOME GAME NPC?!

STORY BY: SORAHOSHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKI KINAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh dear, it seems I was reincarnated into a modern otome game from a fantasy world!

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO MAKE A LOVE POTION! STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT VOL. 1 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, straight-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!

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